

ソードアート・オンライン7

マザーズ・ロザリオ

キリトが巻き込まれた《死銃》事件から数週間。

妖精アバターによる次世代飛行系VR MMO《アルヴヘイム・オンライン》にて、奇妙な騒動が起こる。新マップ《浮遊城アインクラッド》、その第24層主街区北部に現われる謎のアバターが、自身の持つ《オリジナル・ソードスキル》を賭け、1体1の対戦ですべてを蹴散らし続けているという。

《黒の剣士》キリトすらも打ち負かした、《絶剣》と呼ばれるその剣豪アバターにアスナも決闘を挑むのだが、結果、紙一重の差で敗北してしまう。

しかし、そのデュエルが終わるやいなや、《絶剣》はアスナを自身のギルドに誘い始めた!?

《絶剣》と呼ばれるほどの剣の冴え。そこには、ある秘密が隠されており——。「マザーズ・ロザリオ」編、登場!



007

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ソードアート・オンライン7
マザーズ・ロザリオ

川原礫

電撃文庫

550



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かわはら れき
川原 礫

なかなかお返事できませんが、頂いたお手紙は全て脳に刻み込むように拝読しております！先日、「この手紙で川原さんのレベルが上がりますように」という一文にはらはらと落涙しました。超上がりましたとも！今後ともよろしくお願いします！

【電撃文庫作品】

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イラスト: abec

あべしっ！

007

REKI KAWAHARA ABEC BEE-PEE

SWORD ART ONLINE

MOTHER'S ROSARIO



「.....UAAH...」

KIRITO § A PLAYER CALLED THE
«BLACK SWORDSMAN» BY OTHER PLAYERS
TRAPPED IN THE DEATH GAME «SAO».
HIS REAL NAME IS KIRIGAYA KAZUTO.
CHOOSES A SPRIGGAN AVATAR IN «ALO».

「U... UU... I'M SLEEPY!」

SCILICA § A GIRL SAVED BY KIRITO IN «SAO».
WITHIN «ALO», SHE TAKES THE FORM OF A
CAIT SITH, CAPABLE OF TAMING.

「I WONDER WHY LOOKING AT THAT CAUSES SLEEPINESS...
MAYBE IT'S THE ILLUSION-TYPE MAGIC THAT
SPRIGGANS ARE GOOD AT OR SOMETHING?」

LIZBETH § THE GIRL WHO CREATED KIRITO'S
SWORD IN «SAO». IN «ALO»,
SHE'S A LEPRECHAUN BLACKSMITH.

「...AH, I SEE...」

ASUNA § KIRITO'S LOVER.
AN UNDISNINE SORCERESS
IN «ALO».

「I THINK THE REASON WHY SCILICA-
CHAN IS SLEEPY, IS DUE TO THAT!」

LYFA § KIRITO'S SISTER, SUGUHA.
IN «ALO», SHE ACTS AS A SYLPH MAGICAL WARRIOR.

IT'S ALRIGHT,
AS LONG AS HE MATCHES YOU,
ANYONE WHO IS OUTSTANDING IS FINE.
HOWEVER, I'M SAYING THIS IN ADVANCE,
THAT KIND OF KID--
STUDENTS FROM THAT TYPE OF FACILITY
ARE NOT INCLUDED.]

YUUKI
KYOUKO

§ ASUNA'S MOTHER.
A UNIVERSITY LECTURER WHO'S VERY STRICT
ABOUT HER DAUGHTER'S EDUCATION. TRIES
TO GET ASUNA, WHO ATTENDS THE SAME
SCHOOL AS KIRITO, TO CHANGE SCHOOLS.

[.....COULD IT BE.....
YOU INVESTIGATED? ABOUT HIM.....]

ASUNA § THE DAUGHTER OF YUUKI SHOUZOU, CEO OF RECTO,
A LARGE ELECTRONICS COMPANY.
IN THE PAST SHE WAS TRAPPED IN THE VRMMO «SAO»
THAT HER BROTHER KOUICHIROU BOUGHT.



TECCHI § MALE GNOME

「... HOW ABOUT IT?
OUR, SLEEPING KNIGHTS',
REQUEST, WON'T YOU DO IT?」

SHIUNE § A MEMBER OF THE GUILD
«THE SLEEPING KNIGHTS»
LEAD BY «ZEKKEN»
(AKA: ABSOLUTE SWORD).
FEMALE UNDEINE.

TARUKEN § LEPRECHAUN
YOUTH

JUN § SALAMANDER
YOUTH

NORI § SPRIGGAN
GIRL



「WE'RE ALMOST THERE! KEEP GOING, ASUNA!」

YUUKI

A MYSTERIOUS GIRL WHO CAME TO BE KNOWN AS <<ZEKKEN>>
(AKA: ABSOLUTE SWORD) DUE TO HER INCREDIBLY POWERFUL AND FAST
SWORD STYLE. INVITES ASUNA TO JOIN HER PARTY AFTER A DUEL.

「SOMEHOW..... DID YOU REALLY, NEED ME AT ALL?
I DON'T FEEL LIKE THERE'S ANYWHERE
WHERE I COULD HELP YOU ALL OUT WITH.....!」

OSS

ITS FORMAL NAME IS <<ORIGINAL SWORD SKILLS>>. AN IMPROVED VERSION OF THE <<SWORD SKILLS>> SYSTEM FROM THE NOW DEFUNCT <<SWORD ART ONLINE>>, IMPLEMENTED IN <<ALFHEIM ONLINE>>. EACH WEAPON HAS ITS OWN <<SKILL TREE>>. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS SYSTEM BROUGHT FORTH DRASTIC CHANGE TO <<ALO>> WHICH WAS PREVIOUSLY DOMINATED BY LONG-RANGE <<MAGIC>>.

DIFFERENT FROM THE <<SWORD SKILLS>> IN <<SAO>>, OSS ARE NOT SKILLS PREDEFINED BY THE SYSTEM BUT RATHER SKILLS THAT CAN BE INVENTED AND REGISTERED BY THE PLAYER. HOWEVER, IN ORDER TO REGISTER SUCH SKILLS, PLAYERS ARE REQUIRED TO PERFORM THEM 「WITHOUT SYSTEM SUPPORT AT A SPEED NORMALLY IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT SYSTEM ASSIST」. THIS SOMEWHAT CONTRADICTIONARY STRICT REQUIREMENT IS THE MAIN REASON WHY THERE ARE ONLY A FEW PLAYERS WHO POSSESS AN OSS.

THE OSS SYSTEM SUPPORTS A FUNCTION KNOWN AS <<SWORD SKILL INHERITANCE>>. PLAYERS WHO SUCCESSFULLY REGISTER AN OSS ARE ABLE TO PASS DOWN A SINGLE-USE <<SKILL MANUAL>> TO OTHER PLAYERS. BECAUSE THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN OSS IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT, <<SKILL MANUALS>> FOR OSS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH SPECIAL MOVES OF OVER 5-HITS, ARE CURRENTLY THE MOST EXPENSIVE ITEMS IN ALO.



Prologue

"—Asuna, have you heard of «Zekken»?"

Hearing Lisbeth's voice, Asuna stopped typing and looked up.

"A player's number? Are you starting a sports competition?" ^[1]

"No, no." Lisbeth shook her head and smiled. She drank a little from the steaming mug on the table and continued.

"It's kanji, not katakana. It's written with zetsu(絶) from zettai(絶対) and ken(剣) from sword, Absolute Sword."

"Absolute... Sword. Is that a new rare equipment or something?"

"No, no. It's a person's name. A nickname... or alias, so to speak. Nobody knows the character's real name. Anyway, Absolute Sword is very strong. We don't know who started using this name, but this person eventually ended up being known as Absolute Sword. Absolutely invincible sword, peerless sword... I guess that's what it means."

Very strong. It really piqued Asuna's interest when she heard this.

It goes without saying that she was really confident of her sword technique. As an Alfheim Online player, she chose to be an Undine which focuses on supporting with healing magic, but her previous hot-bloodedness would occasionally arise leading her to unsheathe her rapier and charge into enemy formations. Thus, she got a completely inelegant nickname like 'Berserk Healer'.

She actively participates in every month's tournament. Having been accustomed to ALO's three-dimensional battles, Asuna is on par with other strong players like the Salamander General Eugene and the Sylph Lord Sakuya. It's impossible for her to disregard a new strong player's appearance.

After saving her completed biology report, Asuna closed her virtual keyboard, picked up the mug next to her and filled it with hot tea with a tap of her finger. She sunk into the wooden chair which grew out of the floorboards and got into a position where she can listen seriously.

"And...? This Absolute Sword, what is this person like?"

"Let me think..."

Chapter 1

The new Aincrad's 22nd floor was completely covered with snow.

It was early January in the outside world, but even though it was winter, the temperature in Tokyo hardly ever drops below zero due to global warming in the recent years.

However, whether or not it was to show the company's work ethic, Alfheim continued to be under severe cold. The temperature in the area north of the World Tree frequently drops down to 10, 20 degrees below zero. If you didn't prepare cold-resistant equipment or buffs, you wouldn't even want to fly. Currently, Aincrad floated above the Gnome's territory, in the far North of the world. The temperature in every floor was so cold that you could see ice crystals even during the day.

But even though it was so chilly that a brook would get frozen all the way to the bottom, the cold couldn't permeate into the house, which was guarded by thick wooden walls and a roaring fireplace.

8 months ago – On May 2025, Alfheim Online had its largest update up until now – 『Floating Castle Aincrad』 .

ALO originally operated on a duplicated system of the death game «Sword Art Online». Therefore, the server had a complete copy of Aincrad, the stage where SAO was set. In the past, ALO was run by «RECTO Progress». However, when a new company bought both the software and hardware, not only did they not delete Aincrad and former SAO players' character data, but they also boldly proposed a way for it to exist alongside ALO.

Of course, they were also trying to fight against the decrease in playerbase due to RECTO Progress' human experiments by using an impactful upgrade. But that definitely wasn't the only reason. The creators of the new company were all veteran MMO players who'd been playing since the 2D age and couldn't bear the deletion of the intricately designed floating castle– That is what Asuna heard from Agil who had connections with someone from the company.

With Aincrad's resurrection, Asuna set a small goal in her heart and began to play the game as an Undine healer and rapier user. Her goal was obvious: To save enough Col, no, Yurudo, reach the 22nd floor before anyone else, and buy the small wooden house deep within the coniferous

forest. A long time ago in another floating castle, for 2 short weeks in that exact place, she had formed a family and passed sweet, happy, peaceful days.

Last May's update opened the first 10 floors. September opened up the 11th to 20th floors. Then, on Christmas Eve— December 24th's night, the door leading to the 21st floor opened. Asuna, with Kirito, Klein, Agil, Lisbeth, Silica and Lyfa, formed a 7 member party, and rushed up to the next floor as soon as the call celebrating the opening ended.

The 22nd floor was a sparsely populated floor with nothing but forests, and there were plenty of residences in the village's main street, so there'd probably be no competitors aiming for the same house. Even so, they rushed like a gale through the 21st floor's wilderness and challenged the Boss found at the end of the dungeon along with the other parties. Klein later attested that Asuna, despite having spent half of her ability points on support, was even more imposing as she fought at the fore of the 50-man group than back when she was the sub-leader of the «Knights of Blood».

After kicking aside the 21st floor's boss she defeated herself, hurrying to the wooden house and clicking the OK button to confirm the transaction, Asuna couldn't help but weep with happiness. —That night, after the party ended and all their friends left, while drinking a toast with Kirito and Yui, who had returned to her girl form, she cried again. This incident was kept secret from their friends.

Asuna herself wasn't really sure why she was so devoted to that place. Together with the boy who she seriously fell in love with for the first time, although it was in a virtual world, but having surpassed hardships, this was the place where they finally settled down and spent a brief moment of happiness. It sounded simple, but Asuna felt like it wasn't just that.

That house was perhaps, for Asuna who frequently couldn't find a place to return in the real world, a place where she could feel at «home». A small, warm place where a pair of birds could rest their wings, snuggle up and sleep. A place for her soul to return.

More importantly, after all the hard work, that wooden house had become a place where their companions could get together. They rarely ever had no guests. Asuna devoted herself entirely to the interior design of the small house, attracting everyone up from the surface. Not to mention companions from SAO, new friends from ALO frequently visited to eat Asuna's handmade dishes. —Once, due to bad timing, they had a

tension-filled meal where both the Sylph Lord Sakuya and the Salamander General Eugene were both present.

Today– That was January 6th, 2026, a few familiar faces had gathered around the table which «grew out of the house».

To Asuna's right sat the tamer Silica, who had triangular ears unique to Cait Siths. She was currently staring at her math homework on the holographic monitor and whimpering. Similarly, to her left, the Sylph magic swordswoman Lyfa was scowling at her English essay.

Opposite her, the Leprechaun smith Lisbeth sat with her legs crossed and was drinking raspberry liqueur while immersed in a novel sold in-game.

In the real world it was only 4pm, but time in Alfheim differs. Outside, the sky was almost completely black save for the light reflecting off the falling snow. It was obvious that it was freezing cold outside even if you couldn't hear the wind, but the fireplace inside the house crackled. In addition, a warm fragrance was coming from a large pot, where a steaming stew was seething.

Like her friends, Asuna had her hands on a virtual keyboard and viewed sites in the browser windows floating around her, successfully completing her report.

Even though her mother didn't approve of her doing things she could do in reality in the VR world, working here was more efficient in the long term. Her eyes and hands wouldn't tire and a number of informative sites which could not fit into her room's UXGA display floated in easily viewable places.

Asuna once told her mother that and let her try using a FullDive program dedicated to text editing, but she logged off in just a few minutes saying that she was dizzy and ignored it from then on.

Indeed there were people who got dizzy in the virtual world, but Asuna who «lived» in the virtual world for 2 years simply couldn't imagine how that felt. Her fingers moved swiftly without a single error and her essay gradually reached its conclusion–

At that time, something suddenly leaned on her right shoulder.

Asuna took a look and noticed Silica's black, short-haired head leaning on her shoulder, her triangular ears twitching as she slept with a happy expression on her face.

Asuna couldn't help but laugh, and lightly scratched Silica's ears with her left hand.

"Hey, Silica. It'd be a problem if you can't sleep tonight because you slept right now."

"Mm... Nya..."

"There's only 3 days left of Winter Break. You have to work hard on your assignments."

Finally she lightly pulled Silica's ear and she woke up, startled. She blinked a few times with a dazed expression, shook her head and looked at Asuna's face.

"U... uu... So tired."

Muttered Silica, opening her small white-toothed mouth and yawning. All the Cait Sith players Asuna knew got sleepy when they were in this house, making her wonder if it was a racial characteristic.

Asuna took a look at the holographic monitor in front of Silica and said.

"Isn't this page almost at its end? Why not work hard and finish it?"

"Fu... Fuah..."

"Isn't this room too warm? Should we lower the temperature a little?"

Hearing that, Lisbeth smiled and responded.

"No, that isn't it, I'm thinking it's because of that."

"That...?"

Asuna looked back, seeing Lyfa pointing at something on the East wall next to the fireplace.

"Ah... So that's it..."

Looking in that direction, Asuna nodded understandingly.

In front of the glowing red fireplace, there was a large rocking chair carved out of wood.

Deeply seated in the chair, a «Spriggan» with light black skin and short black hair was sound asleep. His previously unkempt hair now stayed down, but his sharp and slightly mischievous face was the same as before. Needless to say, it was Kirito.

On his stomach, a small, light blue feathered dragon was comfortably sleeping with its body curled up and its head buried inside its fluffy tail. That dragon, «Pina», was Silica's partner since back during SAO.

An even smaller pixie with an innocent face slept using Pina's soft feathers as a bed. The girl with long, straight, glossy, black hair and wearing a light pink dress was Kirito's «Navigation Pixie», as well as Asuna and Kirito's 'daughter', the AI «Yui», created in the old SAO server.

Stacked like a three layered cake, Kirito, Pina, and Yui happily slept on the rocking chair, emitting a sort of magical hypnotic effect. Even Asuna felt drowsy after just looking at it for a few seconds.

Kirito could actually sleep quite a lot. It's almost like he was reclaiming the time he lent back during SAO when he had forgone sleep to clear dungeons. In that house, as soon as Asuna's eyes left him, he sank into his favorite rocking chair and immediately fell asleep.

Moreover, Asuna didn't know of anything which was more hypnotic than Kirito's face as he was sleeping in the chair.

Back during SAO, whether it was in the wooden house or the second floor of Agil's shop, whenever Kirito rocked the chair, Asuna almost always sat in it and dozed off with him. That was saying, Asuna had personally experienced and can understand why Silica and Lyfa are tempted to sleep.

Mysteriously, Pina, whose actions should be based on simple algorithms, would fly off Silica's shoulder and curl up and sleep on Kirito whenever she came across Kirito sleeping.

This had cast doubt on whether the sleeping Kirito emitted some sort of «Drowsiness Parameter». In fact, Asuna, who was writing her essay at full speed just moments ago, had unknowingly started feeling sluggish...

"Hey Asuna-san, don't fall asleep yourself! Ah, Liz-san as well!"

Getting shaken by Silica, Asuna lifted her head.

At the same time, Lisbeth, who was on the other side of the table, shakily woke up, blinked and smiled with embarrassment. She swept up her metallic pink hair, unique to Leprechauns, and grudgingly explained.

"Why do I feel sleepy when I look at that... Could this be the illusionary magic Spriggans are good at?"

"Haha, how could that be. I'm going to brew some tea to drive away the sleepiness. Although I say that, I'm really just being lazy."

Asuna stood up and took out 4 cups from the cabinet behind her. Those were the magical mugs which could «pour out 99 different types of tea with a single tap» they got from a recent quest.

Placing the cups and a fruit pie on the table, the four of them, including Silica who was struggling to shake off her drowsiness, immediately took a drink of the warm, fragrant liquid.

"Speaking of which."

At that point, Lisbeth thought of something and said.

"—Asuna, have you heard about «Absolute Sword»?"

"There have been rumors since around the beginning of the year... It started around a week ago..."

Saying that, Lisbeth nodded at Asuna as though confirming something.

"Right, then Asuna obviously doesn't know. You've been in Kyoto since the end of the year."

"Really, don't make me think of things I hate here."

Seeing Asuna frown, Lisbeth laughed out loud.

"Alas, it isn't easy coming from a distinguished family."

"It really isn't easy. You have to sit and greet people in a kimono all day, and even if you want to 『Full Dive』 at night, the place still isn't connected to wireless LAN up to this day. Even though I brought my AmuSphere, it went to waste."

She let out a long sigh and finished her tea.

Since the end of last year, Asuna was half forced to go with her family to the Yuuki head house, in other words her father's old home. She also had to express her thanks to her relatives who were worried during the two years she was 'in hospital', so she couldn't say she hated it.

When she was small, Asuna considered spending the beginning of the year with the main family as natural, and was happy that she could meet cousins around her age.

But, probably around the time she started attending junior high, Asuna gradually began to feel constrained by this custom.

The Yuuki main family had, without exaggeration, been managing banks as a family business in Kyoto since 200 years ago, tenaciously surviving reforms and wars, and the current generation had opened a branch in Kansai. Her father Yuuki Shouzou was able to develop «RECTO», a general electronics manufacturing company, in one generation thanks to the main family's financial assistance. Taking a look at the family pedigree, presidents and bureaucrats were everywhere.

As if it was natural, Asuna's cousins and brothers were also «top students» in «good schools». When all the children were seated side by side during the banquet, their parents talked about topics like how their children received praise in a certain competition or how high they ranked in a national exam. While appearing nice on the surface, they were just bickering without end in reality. Asuna gradually noticed a sense of malice in the environment surrounding her, it seemed to her like the purpose of organizing that function every year was to rank all the children.

In November 2022, during the winter of her third year of junior high, Asuna was trapped in SAO, until January 2025, when she was freed by Kirito. That's why this was her first new year's greeting in the last 4 years. In the Kyoto-styled mansion at the head house, Asuna wore a long-sleeved kimono and repeatedly greeted her many relatives starting with her grandparents. In the end, she felt like she had become a reception NPC.

Even so, meeting the cousins she hadn't seen for a long time should've been a happy event, even though they were joyful about Asuna's return as though it was a matter of their own, Asuna saw something she hated in their eyes.

Her cousins all pitied Asuna. They felt sympathetic, sad that Asuna prematurely dropped out of the competition that had been going on since

they were born. It was not that she was thinking too much. Asuna could easily tell, having read people's expressions since she was young.

Of course, the current Asuna had a completely different personality from that time. In that world, there was a boy who inexplicably changed Asuna. Therefore her cousins', uncles' and aunts' pity only lightly swept against Asuna's heart. Above all, she was a «swordswoman», a person who fought using her own power. That belief always supported Asuna's heart, and didn't change even after that world disappeared.

But her cousins, who considered VRMMOs poisonous, could not understand that value. The same went for her mother who was always slightly unhappy when she was with the main family.

The obsession to go to a good university and find a good job didn't exist anymore. Asuna really liked her current school, and in another year she could slowly find what she wanted to do. Of course, forming a family with a boy slightly younger than her in the real world was her final goal.

—Asuna thought about that on one side, and continued to answer her relatives' various question with a smile on the other. The most unbearable thing was being alone in a room with a cousin two years older than her on the last night in Kyoto.

As a man who's sole duty is assisting the main family's bank, he talked vigorously about how he was professional, how he had already decided what position to take in the business and how outstanding he was going to be. In the beginning Asuna just put up a smile of admiration, but suspiciously everyone had gone and left the two of them alone, causing her to wonder whether the adults had any dubious intentions...

"Hey Asuna, are you listening?"

Getting kicked by Lisbeth under the table, Asuna returned to herself.

"Ah, sorry. I remembered something I hated."

"What is it? A meeting for marriage in Kyoto?"

"..."

"... Why did you freeze... Could it be..."

"No, no. It's nothing!"

Asuna rapidly shook her head, tapped the side of her now empty mug and gulped down the strange purple tea. She looked up and forcefully changed the subject.

"Very strong... Then is that person a PKer?"

"Um, Absolute Sword's a PVPer. Slightly to the North of the 24th floor's main street, isn't there a tourist attracting island with a large tree? Under that tree at 3pm every day, Absolute Sword fights any player who wishes for a challenge."

"Oh~ So is Absolute Sword the type who had participated in competitions?"

"No, it seems like a completely new face. However Absolute Sword's skill levels seem rather high, so it's possible that Absolute Sword transferred over from another game. In the beginning, a notice was put up on «MMO Tomorrow» recruiting challengers. Around 30 people went thinking that it was just an overconfident novice who'd immediately lose, but..."

"Instead they got defeated?"

"All of them, beautifully. Absolute Sword should be quite strong, it's said that not a single person was able to cut down more than 30% of Absolute Sword's health."

"It's slightly unbelievable."

Silica, who had been eating fruit pie until then, suddenly interrupted.

"It took me around half a year before I could really fight in mid-air. But even though that person only transferred over recently, they can fly so well!"

The so called «Transfer» was a character transferring system for VRMMOs like ALO using «The Seed» as a platform. It could preserve the player's «strength» in general, but all money and items are lost and certain skills would be redistributed.

"Has Silica also fought Absolute Sword before?"

In response to Asuna's question, Silica immediately widened her eyes and shook her head.

"How can that be? I was convinced that it's impossible for me just from spectating Absolute Sword's duel. Ah, but Liz-san and Lyfa-san still fought Absolute Sword. They're quite bold stepping up for a challenge."

"Shut up."

"Anything can be a good experience, you know."

Smiling as she listened to Lisbeth and Lyfa pout, Asuna was slightly shocked.

Lisbeth, who's race didn't tend to fight and prioritized forging was out of question, but there weren't many players who could defeat Lyfa, who could be considered the Sylph's top player, in an aerial fight. Moreover, Absolute Sword just transferred over, that type of thing was unheard of.

"That sounds like the real thing. Hmm, I'm slightly interested."

"Haha, I knew Asuna would say that. Even though there are lords and generals who rank high in the monthly competition like Sakuya and Eugene, it's hard for people in their position to participate in street fights."

"But if people see that Absolute Sword's so strong, won't there be no challengers? It's different from large competitions, isn't there a hefty experience penalty if you lose in a street fight?"

"Not at all. Everyone enthusiastically participated in this gamble."

Silica once again chimed in.

"Eh? Is a super powerful rare item being gambled?"

"It's not an item. Absolute Sword actually gambled an «Original Sword Skill». One which is a super strong, finishing move level."

Asuna can't help but want to copy Kirito's habit of shrugging and whistling, but she held back.

"So it's an OSS. What type? How many hits?"

"Let me think, it seems like it's usable by one-handed swords in general. It's a shocking 11-hit combo."

"Wow~!"

This time she really reflexively let out a cry.

The key system in the currently non-existent SAO is 'Sword Skills'.

There were 'skills' set for the innumerable weapons, there were many skills ranging from strong single-hit attacks to flurries of continuous attacks. The difference from normal attacks was that from the moment you assume the starting position, your body would automatically move at the system's highest speed until the skill was complete. The gorgeous light and sound effects accompanying hits let the user savor the joy of becoming a super warrior.

In Alfheim, in the large scale updates surrounding Aincrad's implementation, the new company made a bold decision to re-implement sword skills as they were.

That was, in the new ALO, there was a huge revolution starting from the very roots of the battle system. This obviously caused a mighty uproar from some players, but dissenters pretty much became slaves to the thrill as soon as they experienced sword skills once.

Before that, in ALO, gorgeous effects were monopolized by magic, which also had superior range and accuracy, so not many people chose to specialize in melee. That's why it could be said that the appearance of sword skills balanced things out. Even though it had been half a year since the upgrade, the new battle system with «Aerial mobility» + «Sword Skills» was still the topic of many discussions.

These sword skills borrowed from their predecessors weren't enough to satisfy the audacious organizers.

So they developed and included a new element, the «Original Sword Skill» system.

Like the name implied, that was a 'personal sword skill'. It was not an already existing sword skill which had all of its actions set from the start, those were sword skills which players could compile themselves.

When this feature was announced, in order to get a gorgeous finishing move of their own, a lot of players scrambled into the streets and wilderness and brandished various weapons. –And they all tasted deep frustration.

Registering an OSS (Original Sword Skill) was extremely easy.

First you open the menu, move to the OSS panel, enter the sword skill recording mode and press Start. After that you just swung your weapon as you wanted and press Finish. That was it.

However, there's a harsh requirement for the system to approve of «the finishing move you thought up».

Single hit slashes and thrusts are almost all registered as preexisting sword skills. Therefore if you want to compile an OSS, it had to be a combo. However, as a series of actions, there couldn't be any flaws in the various aspects like the center of gravity and trajectory. In addition, the speed must be almost as fast as the completed sword skill.

That was saying, "You must execute a combo which should be impossible without system support, without the system's assistance." A harsh requirement which could be considered contradictory.

There was only one way to overcome that barrier, and that was repeatedly practicing innumerable times. Until your nerves completely remembered the series of actions.

Almost all the players couldn't stand that type of boring assignment and easily gave up their dream of having a 'personal finishing move'. However, a portion of the hard workers successfully managed to create and register their OSS, receiving an honor equivalent to that of the head of a sword style in the middle ages. Actually, some players started guilds named [00ryuu] and some even opened dojos in town.

What made that possible was the 'Sword Skill Inheritance' feature in the OSS system. The original creator of the OSS could pass on the 'Skill Manual' to other players.

Not to mention PvP, OSS also had a significant effect in PvE. That's why everyone wanted them. According to the trend, the skill's inheritance fetched a huge price. Skill manuals for «finishing moves» over 5 hits were currently the most expensive thing in ALO. It was general knowledge that the strongest OSS up till now was the 8-hit «Volcanic Blazer» compiled by the Salamander General Eugene, which hadn't been passed on to anyone as he wasn't short on money. Asuna herself managed to create a 5-hit one after several months of hard work, but that had already exhausted her strength, and she wasn't thinking of starting a new one.

Appearing in that situation was 『Absolute Sword』, the mysterious swordmaster with an exceptional 11-hit combo.

"Well, if that's the case then it's understandable that there'd be plenty of challengers. Has everyone personally witnessed that sword skill?"

The three of them immediately shook their heads in response to Asuna's question. Representing them, Lisbeth responded.

"Hmm, it seems like it was shown on the very first day of the street fights, but it hasn't been used in actual combat... Rather, nobody is able to force Absolute Sword to use that OSS."

"Even Lyfa can't?"

In response, Lyfa's shoulders dropped and she shook her head.

"Even though we were about even when both of our HP was around 60%... In the end I got defeated by a normal skill."

"Oh... –Speaking of which, the important things still haven't been asked. Absolute Sword's race, weapon? What are they?"

"Oh, Absolute Sword's an Imp. The weapon used was a one-handed sword, but it's almost as thin as Asuna-san's rapier –Overall, Absolute Sword's very fast. The normal attacks were almost as fast as sword skills... So fast that my eyes almost couldn't follow Absolute Sword's actions. That was the first time I encountered such a thing, I was really shocked."

"A speed type, eh? If even Lyfa can't follow Absolute Sword's movements, then I probably have no chance either... –Ah."

At this point, Asuna remembered something important.

"Talking about speed, there's another player who feels like a cheater sleeping over there. What about Kirito-kun? It seems like he'd be interested in this sort of thing."

At this, Lisbeth, Silica and Lyfa glanced at each other and suddenly laughed out loud.

"–Wha, What is it?"

Looking at the shocked Asuna, Lyfa giggled and said something shocking.

"Hahaha. –My brother has already fought Absolute Sword. Moreover, he also beautifully lost."

"How..."

Lost. That Kirito.

Asuna was frozen, agape for several seconds.

In Asuna's heart, Kirito as a swordsman was already synonymous with «absolutely strongest». In both SAO and ALO, from the people Asuna knew, the only person who defeated Kirito in a duel was the leader of the Knights of Blood, Heathcliff, and that was only due to the system's protection as a Game Master.

Even though she hadn't mentioned it to Lisbeth and the others, Asuna herself actually seriously fought Kirito once back in SAO.

This was before they understood each other, back when Asuna commanded the front lines as KoB's sub-leader.

While they were discussing the method to defeat the strong boss of a certain floor, there was an opposition between guilds led by KoB who prioritized speed and several solo players led by Kirito. Both sides couldn't find a compromise, so in the end they decided to let the representatives of both sides duel.

At that time, Asuna was already interested in Kirito, but she also wanted to purge that thought. At that time she believed that putting personal emotions before clearing the game should not be tolerated.

Asuna felt that the duel was a good chance to defeat the weakness in her heart. Defeat Kirito, efficiently defeat the boss and once again return to her cold self.

But Asuna didn't know about the strength hidden behind Kirito's unreliable-looking face.

That duel was really heated. As their swords crossed, all the unnecessary thoughts in Asuna's head were blown away, only the pleasure of fighting a good opponent filled her body. She felt as though she was directly fighting with her nerve impulses, something which she had never felt before. It lasted around 10 minutes, but Asuna didn't notice the length of the time.

Then Asuna lost. Kirito did an overly realistic feint – the reason was understood later – of «pulling a second sword from behind his back and attacking», Asuna reflexively blocked and was beautifully hit in the resulting opening.

In the end, after experiencing that fight, Asuna's feelings instead became something which she couldn't give up, and at the same time, a deep impression of Kirito's sword was left in Asuna's heart.

–The strongest swordsman. Up to this day, even after the «Black Swordsman» from SAO had disappeared, this belief hadn't wavered.

That's why Asuna was disquieted when she heard Kirito lost to 'Absolute Sword'.

Asuna shifted her gaze from Lyfa to Lisbeth and shakingly asked.

"Kirito-kun, he... Are you serious?"

"Well~ Yes..."

Lisbeth frowned and shrugged.

"Even if you ask me, for that level of fighting, someone like me can't determine whether they're serious... But Kirito wasn't dual-wielding, so in that aspect he wasn't going all out. Moreover, that..."

Lisbeth paused, her eyes reflecting the light from the fireplace, and took a look at the sleeping Kirito. His mouth displaying a constant smile.

"This is what I think. Probably, in a normal game, Kirito won't fight seriously anymore. On the other hand, Kirito only fights seriously when the game isn't a game anymore, when the virtual world becomes real... That's why it's better if situations which force him to fight seriously don't appear. From the beginning, he was the type to easily get wrapped up in troublesome things."

"..."

Asuna also looked at the black-haired swordsman's sleeping face for a while, and nodded at Lisbeth.

"Ah... That's true."

On either side, Lyfa and Silica slowly nodded with various emotions.

The one who broke the temporary silence was Kirito's sister in the real world, Lyfa.

"–However, this is just my impression... But I think my brother was serious. At least, I feel like he didn't go easy. Moreover..."

"... What?"

"Even though I'm not sure, but shortly before the duel was concluded, when their blades were locked together, my brother seemed to have said something to Absolute Sword... Immediately after that, the distance between the two widened and my brother wasn't able to avoid Absolute Sword's charge and lost..."

"Hmm... So what did he say?"

"Thing is, even if I ask him he won't tell me. However, it feels like... there's something."

"Really? Then it probably wouldn't work even if I asked him."

Asuna looked down at her hand and muttered.

"...All that's left is to directly ask Absolute Sword, then."

Hearing this, Lisbeth raised her eyebrows.

"So you really want to fight?"

"Even though I don't feel like I'd win. I have a feeling this person called Absolute Sword came to ALO for a certain purpose. I'm talking about something other than street fights."

"Ah, I also think so. However, to know that, you must be on the same level as Kirito. What about your character? Which are you going with?"

Asuna thought a little about Lisbeth's question. Other than the Undine rapier user «Asuna» which was transferred over from SAO, she also made a new account and trained a new character from scratch: the Sylph «Erika». The reason she created a new character was extremely simple: Sometimes she wanted to change her appearance too.

Erika specialized in melee and had most of its ability points devoted to dagger skills, so it was more suited for duels than Asuna which was half healer. However, Asuna shrugged and immediately replied.

"I'll go with this one, which I'm more used to. Since the opponent is a speed type, victory would probably be decided in an instant rather than by DPS. Is everyone coming?"

Looking around, Lisbeth, Silica and Lyfa nodded at the same time. Silica happily waved her tail and said.

"Of course! There's no way I'd skip this match."

"I don't really know whether or not it can be called a match... Well, then it's decided. Absolute Sword appears on the island on the 24th floor around 3pm, right? Then let's meet here at 2:30."

Clapping her hands, Asuna called out the menu and looked at the time in reality.

"Not good, it's already 6, I'm almost late for dinner."

"Then let's part here for today."

Lyfa saved the window in front of her and quickly packed up. After saying goodbye to the 3 people, the Sylph swordswoman quietly approached the rocking chair, held the back of the chair and suddenly shook it wildly.

"Brother, wake up! It's time to go!"

Smiling at this scene, Asuna suddenly remembered something and faced Lisbeth.

"Hey, Liz."

"What is it?"

"Just now, you mentioned that Absolute Sword transferred over... Since Absolute Sword's so strong, is it possible that... it's someone from SAO?"

In response to the whispered question, Lisbeth nodded with a serious expression on her face.

"I suspected that. But when I asked Kirito what he thought after his fight with Absolute Sword..."

"What did Kirito-kun say...?"

"He said that there was no way Absolute Sword was originally a SAO player. His reason being..."

"..."

"He said that if Absolute Sword existed in that world, «Dual Blades» would've been given to that person instead."

Chapter 2

Beep, beep.

The AmuSphere shut down with that short electronic sound.

Asuna slowly opened her eyes. Even before her eyes focused on the ceiling of the dark room, Asuna felt the cold, humid air sticking to her skin.

Although she set the air conditioner to weak heating mode, it seems like she forgot to disable the timer and it ended up turning off during FullDive. The temperature in her 10 tatami room is almost the same as the temperature outside. Noticing a small sound, she turned towards the large window and noticed numerous water droplets on the black glass.

Asuna shivered as she slowly got out of bed. She stretched her finger toward the controls on the buried control panel and tapped the touch sensor. With just that motion, followed by a short motor sound, the curtains closed, hot air blew out of the air conditioner and the LED lights on the ceiling released a pale orange light.

The packaging interior technology developed by RECTO had been installed in Asuna's room. The room was renovated while she was in hospital, but for some reason Asuna couldn't like this convenient system. Everything in the room being controlled with a window was a matter of course in the virtual world, but for some reason it feels a little cold when it appears in the real world. It felt like she was always in the inorganic line of sight of the sensors installed across the walls and floors.

Perhaps the reason she felt like that was because she visited Kirito so many times, that is to say Kirigaya Kazuto's home. The warmth of the traditional Japanese house contrasted her own's coldness. The house of her grandparents on her mother's side felt the same way. When she went there to play during the summer, she always sat on the sunny porch and swung her legs while eating the shaved ice her grandmother made. However, her grandparents on her mother's side had passed away a long time ago and that house had also been torn down quite a while ago—

Sighing softly, Asuna put on her slippers and stood up. She suddenly felt slightly dizzy, so she looked down for a while, strongly aware of the heavy weight pulling at her body in reality.

Of course, a sense of weight is also simulated inside the fantasy world. However, in that world, Asuna's body and soul could soar in the sky with

just a light stomp on the floor. The real world's weight was not simply physical, it also contained too many aspects which could not be gotten rid of no matter how much you tried. Although she wanted to lie down on her bed, dinnertime wasn't far off. If she was even a minute late, her mother would have another thing to complain about.

As she trudged towards the closet, the door slid open without waiting for her to move her hand. Taking off her comfortable sweater, she reluctantly threw it towards her bed. She changed into a dark, unblemished, cherry-colored skirt and sat down at the adjacent dressing table. The three-sided mirror opened and the lights above automatically turned on as well.

Even at home, Asuna's mother wouldn't let her dress slovenly. Asuna picked up a comb and quickly tidied her hair which got disheveled while in FullDive.

Asuna suddenly remembered a scene she saw at the Kirigaya house in Kawagoe.

Lyfa/Suguha said that she and Kirito were responsible for preparing dinner that day. A blurry-eyed Kazuto was forcefully dragged downstairs by Suguha. The two of them stood side by side in the kitchen, Suguha cutting the vegetables while Kirito roasted the fish. Their mother returned at that time, and enjoyed a beer while watching TV. They lively chatted while the dishes were being prepared and when dinner was ready, the three of them said "Let's eat" together.

Shakingly letting out a long sigh, Asuna held back her tears, put down her comb and stood up.

The lights behind her extinguished without waiting for her to close the door as she walked out of her room towards the dark corridor.

The maid Sada Akiyo just opened the front door as Asuna walked down the semicircular stairs and reached the first floor. She had prepared dinner and was about to head home.

Asuna faced the short 40-year-old woman and greeted her.

"You've worked hard, Sada-san. I'm very thankful for your work everyday. I'm sorry I've waited until now to say this."

At this, Akiyo shook her head with eyes widened as though there's no such thing and immediately greeted her back.

"It, it's nothing, miss. This is work."

Over the past year, Asuna already understood that it was useless however she said it. So she just approached her and quietly asked.

"Have mother and brother returned yet?"

"It seems like Kouichirou-sama won't return till later. Mistress is already in the dining room."

"... Is that so, thanks. I'm sorry for bothering you."

Asuna nodded at her, and Akiyo bowed once again before reopening the door and hurrying home.

Asuna recalled that she has two children in junior high and primary school. Even though she also lives in Setagaya, it'd be 7:30 by the time she got home after buying groceries. It was a tough time for children with good appetite. Asuna once told her mother to let her just leave the completed dinner here, but her mother just ignored her.

Hearing the metallic noise of the three doors locking, Asuna turned around and crossed the entrance hall to reach the dining room.

As soon as she pushed open the thick oak door, a quiet yet strict voice reached Asuna's eardrums.

"You're late."

Looking at the clock on the wall, it was exactly 6:30. Just as Asuna was about to say this, her voice came once again.

"Please arrive at the dining table five minutes earlier."

"... Sorry."

Muttering quietly, Asuna stepped on the carpet, approached the table and sat down on a high back chair with eyes downcast.

In the center of the 20 tatami dining room was a long table surrounded by eight chairs. The second chair from the northeast corner is Asuna's seat. Her brother Kouichirou sat to her left and her father Shouzou sat at the east end, but these two seats were currently empty.

Asuna's mother Yuuki Kyouko sat diagonally to her left, reading a book on economics with her favorite sherry in one hand.

She's fairly tall for a woman. Even though she's thin, her solid frame removes any sense of slimness. Her hair which was dyed a rich, brown color parted to the sides, neatly cut along her jaw.

Even though her face is handsome, her high nose and jawline, as well as the deep wrinkles near her mouth, created a severely cold impression. Perhaps that was the impression she wanted to create. With her sharp tongue and acrimonious political stance, she defeated all her competitors in the school and became a professor at the age of 49 last year.

As Asuna sat down, Kyouko closed the hard-covered book, placed her napkin on her knees and picked up her knife and fork before finally looking at Asuna.

Asuna looked down, muttered "Let's eat", and picked up a spoon.

For a while, the only sound in the dining room was the clanking of silverware.

The menu was vegetable salad with blue cheese, scafata di fave, fried fish with herb sauce, whole wheat bread... things like that. Every day's food was determined by Kyouko's nutrition calculations, but of course she didn't cook it herself.

While eating, Asuna wondered since when did meals with just the two of them become so tension-filled.

No, perhaps it had been like that since a long time ago. She remembered being severely reprimanded when she spilled her soup or didn't eat her vegetables. It was just that in the past, Asuna didn't know that meals could also be lively.

As she mechanically ate, her thoughts wandered off to her house in the other world. Kyouko's voice suddenly pulled her back to reality.

"... Were you using that machine again?"

Asuna glanced at her mother, and nodded.

"... Yes. Since everyone agreed to meet up and work on our assignments together."

"Things like assignments, you won't learn anything if you don't work on it yourself."

Kyouko wouldn't understand even if she told her she worked on it on her own. Asuna lowered her head and changed the topic.

"Everyone lives really far apart. Over there, we can meet at any time."

"Using that type of machine isn't considered meeting. From the very beginning, assignments are things meant to be done on your own. You're just playing around if you're doing it with friends."

Tipping her glass of sherry, Kyoko spoke faster.

"Listen well, you don't have any time to play. Since you're already two years slower than the other children, you naturally need to work hard enough to make up for those years."

"... I've been studying well. Isn't the second semester's report card already printed and placed on your desk?"

"I've looked at it, but evaluations from that kind of school can't even be considered."

"That kind... of school?"

"Listen well, Asuna. In the third semester, you will also be tutored outside of school. Not the recently popular type which is done over the internet, they would come over to this house."

"Wait... Wait a moment, why are you suddenly..."

"Look at this."

Kyouko stopped Asuna's protest without leaving any room for explanation and picked up a Tablet PC from the table. Asuna frowned as she glanced at the screen of the Tablet PC which her mother passed her.

"... What is this... An outline for a... test for transfer students?"

"It's a test for transferring into the third year of a high school directed by one of your mother's friend, it's a chance I only managed to get by persuading her in every way possible. This is not like that patched together school, it's a proper school. It's credit-based there, so you only need to go there for half a year to fulfill the requirements for graduating. That way, you can start attending university in September."

Asuna looked at Kyouko dumb-founded, placed the Tablet PC on the table and lifted her left hand to cut off her mother who was getting more and more passionate.

"Wait, wait a moment. I'm really bothered that you decided this on your own. I really like this school. There are plenty of good teachers there, I can learn properly even if I stay. There's no need to transfer."

At those words, Kyouko exaggeratedly sighed, closed her eyes, tilted her gold-rimmed glasses and sat up straight. This action was unique to Kyouko, and was a speaking technique often used to let her opponent know her superiority. Even men cowered when she did this action on the teacher room's sofa. Even her husband Shouzou tries his best to avoid opposing Kyouko's views while at home.

"... Mother has researched properly."

Kyouko spoke with a didactic tone.

"The place you're going to can't even be called a school. The curriculum is sloppy and the lessons' standard are also low. The teachers are patched together, hardly any of them have a proper history. Rather than an academic facility, that place is more of an asylum."

"That... That kind of statement..."

"They make it sound nice and call it a facility for educating students delayed by the incident, but in reality, that school is just a place for them to monitor all the children who might cause problems in the future. This type of facility is necessary for those children who've been killing each other in that bizarre world, but you don't need to go as well."

"..."

Asuna couldn't even respond to this overly one sided speech.

The school she had been attending since the beginning of last spring was in Nishitokyo, and it really was urgently built within two months of the project's announcement. Its purpose was to help the children whose education was delayed by 2 years as a result of being trapped in the death game «Sword Art Online». All SAO players under the age of 18 had free admission, and if you graduate you could apply for university entrance exams. That extremely good treatment received criticism for a while.

However, Asuna herself understood while attending the school that it wasn't simply a safety net. All the students were obligated to participate in a consultation once a week, which involved answering questions that were blatant tests for anti-social behaviour. According to your answers, you might be sent to a hospital for diagnosis or even put on medication. So Kyouko calling it an «Asylum» wasn't completely baseless.

Even so, Asuna loved that school. No matter what the government and ministry of education were thinking, the teachers were all people who volunteered and candidly faced their students. There was no need for students to intentionally hide their past, and more importantly, she could be together with close friends. With Lisbeth, Silica, some of her companions from the front lines, and also – Kirito.

Asuna clenched her fork and bit her lip, and fought against the impulse in her heart to tell her mother everything from beginning to end.

She fought with the impulse to tell her: "I'm one of those people «who've been killing each other» that her mother mentioned. I'd been living by killing with my sword everyday, and I do not feel a shred of remorse for those days."

Kyouko continued to speak, unaware of the struggle in Asuna's heart.

"Even if you attend that kind of place, you couldn't get into university properly. Think about it, you're already eighteen years old. However, where you are now, you don't know when you'd be able to go to university. You have to go to the examination centre for an examination next week. Are you not worried at all?"

"Things like going to university... There aren't any major problems even if you go a few years later. Besides, going to university isn't the only path in life..."

"No."

Kyouko coldly rejected Asuna's words.

"You have the ability. You know how much trouble your mother has gone through in order to draw out that ability. Yet you wasted two years in that strange game... Mother wouldn't say this if you were a normal child. However, you're not like that. Not making full use of your talent and letting it rot is a sin. You have the qualifications and ability needed to go to an excellent university and receive a top-class education. So you should do

so. You can stay at university and continue learning or make use of your ability in the government or an enterprise, your mother wouldn't interfere to that extent. However, I will not allow you to give up the chance to receive higher education."

"I do not have things like innate talent."

Asuna finally managed to get a word in during Kyouko's long speech.

"A person's way of living should be decided by herself, right? In the past, I also thought that going to a good university and finding a good job was everything in life. However, I've changed. Even though I can't answer you right now, I'm sure I can find something I want to do. I want to stay at my current school for another year and find out what that is."

"That's just limiting your own choices. No matter how many years you stay at that kind of place, you wouldn't have any roads to take. Things are different if you change schools though. The university above is also a famous one, so if you get good results there, you can transfer over to mother's university. Listen well, Asuna. Mother doesn't want you to walk down a miserable path. I want you to have a career which you can proudly show to anyone."

"My career... Then, what was with that person introduced to me in January? ... Even though I don't know what he was told, that person talked as though he was already my fiance. Isn't mother the one who's limiting my lifestyle?"

Asuna couldn't muffle the quiver in her voice. Even though she put all her strength into her stare, Kyouko just unmovingly drank from her glass.

"Marriage is also a part of your career. If you do not marry someone who isn't materially free, you'll regret it in a few years. The things you said you want to do will also become impossible. In that aspect, Yuuya is perfect. These days, a local bank run by our family is much more reassuring than large banks with constant struggles between factions. Also, mother really likes Yuuya. Isn't he a really straightforward boy?"

"... It seems like you didn't reflect on it at all. The one who started the incident which caused me and many other people pain and placed RECTO in financial crisis, was Sugou Nobuyuki who was chosen by mother."

"Shut up."

Kyouko's countenance changed, and she waved her left hand as though to drive away an annoying aphid.

"I don't want to hear about that person... Originally, the one who was fond of him and wanted to adopt him as a son was your father. From the very beginning, he was never any good at judging people. It doesn't matter, although Yuuya isn't really imposing, but that way we can rest assured."

Indeed, Asuna's father Shouzou never really paid much attention to the people around him. He put all his energy into running the company, even now after having stepped down from his position as CEO, he still disregarded his family in order to adjust their cooperation with overseas capital. Shouzou himself only said that he thought highly of Sugou's aspirations, developing and managing abilities, that it was due to his own incompetence that he didn't notice Sugou's inner personality.

However, Asuna understood that one of the reasons Sugou Nobuyuki kept getting more and more aggressive since junior high was due to the harsh pressure from the people around him. Moreover, a portion of that pressure definitely came from Kyouko's words.

Asuna swallowed her complaints and stiffly said.

"Anyways, I absolutely do not want to go out with that person. I will choose my own partner."

"It's alright, as long as he matches you, anyone who is outstanding is fine. However, I'm saying this in advance, that kind of kid – students from that type of facility are not included."

"..."

From that sentence, she felt that Kyouko was hinting at a certain person, Asuna was once again dumbfounded.

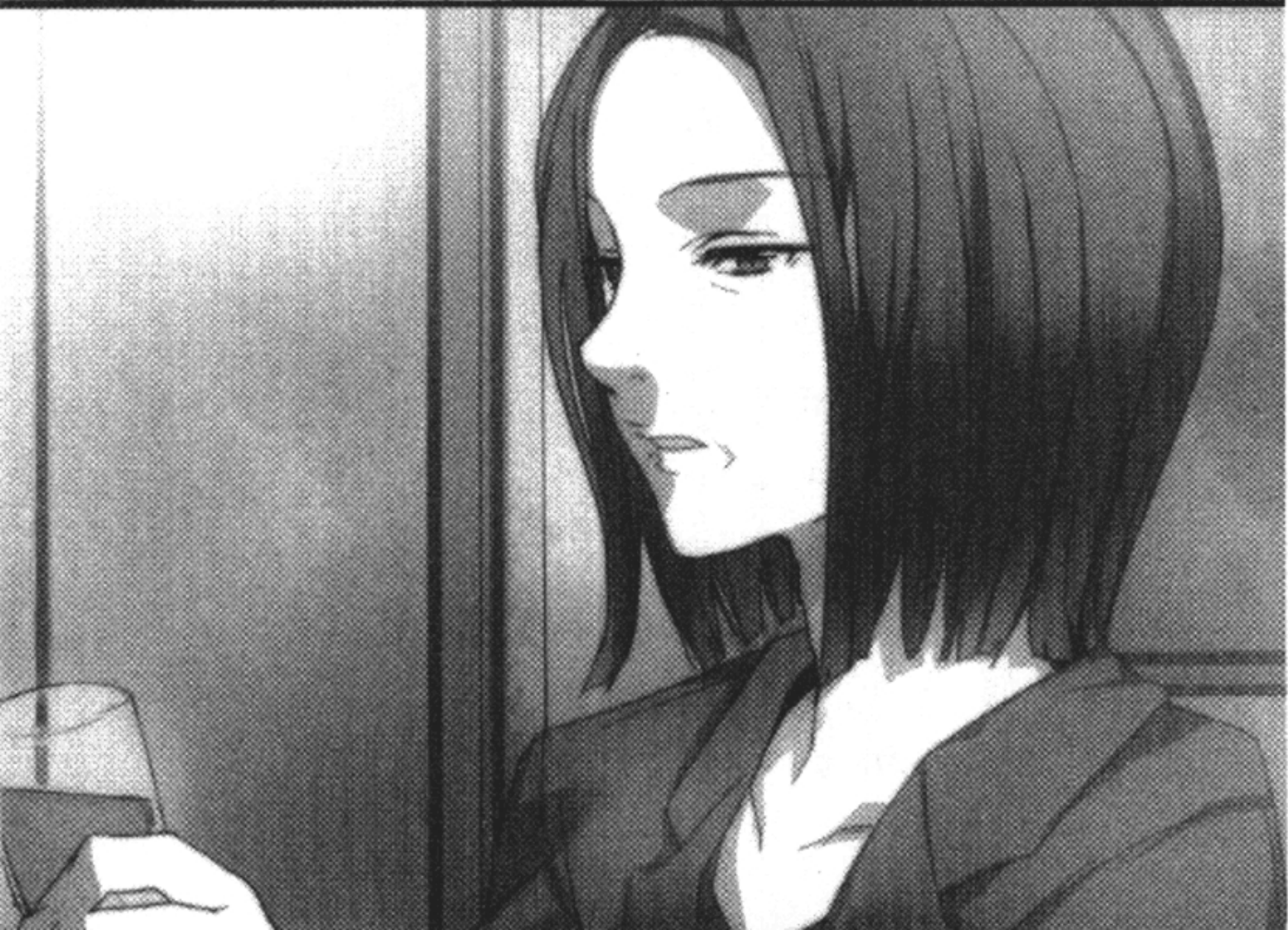
"... Could it be... You investigated? About him..."

She muttered with a quivering voice, but Kyouko didn't deny or confirm it, instead she just changed the topic.

"You have to understand, your mother as well as your father wish for your happiness. We've hoped for this since you were in kindergarten. Even though you encountered a small setback, you can definitely recover. As long as you seriously work hard. You can accumulate a brilliant career."

It's not mine, it's yours, Asuna grumbled to herself.

Asuna and her brother Kouichirou are both an aspect of Kyouko's «brilliant career». Kouichirou entered a first rate university and got solid results at RECTO, satisfying Kyouko. Asuna should have followed, but was involved in an incomprehensible thing like the SAO incident, followed by a drop in RECTO's corporate image due to Sugou's case, causing Kyouko to feel as though there was a blemish in her life.



Asuna lost the strength to continue arguing, put down her cutlery on the half-filled plate and stood up.

"... About transferring, I'll think about it."

She was just saying that for now, but Kyouko insipidly replied:

"The deadline is next week. Fill in the required information and print three copies on the study's table before then."

Asuna looked down, turned around and walked towards the door. She originally wanted to just return to her room, but something lingered in her heart, she turned around, faced Kyouko and said.

"Mother."

"... What is it?"

"Do you still feel ashamed about your dead parents, resentful that you were born by a farmer rather than a famous house with history?"

Kyouko's eyes widened in shock for a moment, followed by deep wrinkles near her eyebrows and mouth.

"... Asuna! Come over here!"

Although she could still hear the sharp voice, Asuna closed the door and blocked out the words. She quickly walked up the stairs, as though to run away, and opened the door to her own room.

At the same time, the sensors noticed Asuna and automatically activated the lights and air conditioner.

Asuna felt an intolerable restlessness, she walked straight to the room's control panel and shut down the integrated AI. Just like that, she flopped onto the bed and buried her face in the large mattress, ignoring the wrinkles on her expensive blouse.

She didn't feel like crying. As a swordswoman, she already decided not to cry tears of grief or sadness. However, that determination couldn't endure the infinitely increasing unhappiness in her chest.

What kind of swordswoman are you, ridiculed a part of her heart. You're just slightly good at swinging a sword in a game, what power do you have in the real world? Asuna bit her lips and asked herself.

Meeting a certain boy in that world, she should have changed. She should've stopped blindly following values given to her by others and fought for things she truly had to do.

However, looking from outside, how was she any different from before she went to that world? She still acted like a doll and displayed an empty smile in front of her relatives, she couldn't simply refuse the path her parents forced on her. If she could only truly believe in herself in the virtual world, then why did she return to reality.

"Kirito... Kirito."

Unconsciously, she started calling that name repeatedly.

Kirito – Kirigaya Kazuto, still managed to maintain the strong will he obtained in SAO even after returning to reality for over a year. He should also be bearing considerable pressure, yet he never let it show on his face.

In the past, when she asked what Kirito wanted to accomplish in the future, Kirito embarrassedly smiled and replied that he wished to become a producer rather than a player. Moreover, not only something like a software for a game, he wanted to replace the currently constraint-ridden FullDive technology and produce a more intimate man-machine interface. For this, it seemed like he'd been visiting overseas technology forums, actively learning and exchanging opinions.

Asuna felt that he would rush towards that goal without confusion. If possible, she wanted to stay by his side and pursue the same dream. She looked carefully at what she should learn and hoped that they could continue to go to school together in the following year.

However, it seemed like that path had already been cut off. She still couldn't resist in the end, that feeling of powerlessness assaulted Asuna.

"Kirito-kun..."

She hoped that she could immediately see him. Even if it wasn't in the real world, she wanted to be alone with him in that house, cry to her heart's content on his chest and tell him everything.

However, she couldn't. The thought that the one Kirito loves wasn't the powerless Yuuki Asuna, that it was one of the strongest warriors, Asuna «The Flash», became heavy shackles and haunted her.

『Asuna... is very strong... Much stronger than I am...』

She remembered these words which Kirito whispered to her in that world. She might distance herself from his heart if she showed weakness.

That was too scary. Asuna lied down, and unknowingly entered a light sleep.

She saw herself with a sheathe decorated with silver hanging from her waist, arm in arm with Kirito, walking somewhere in the sunlight shining through the tree leaves. However, another one of her was locked in a dark place, only able to silently look at the laughing two.

In that bittersweet dream, Asuna strongly wished to return to that world.

Chapter 3

Aincrad's 24th floor was a limnetic floor mostly covered in water. Its style is similar to the currently unreleased lake city «Salemburg» on the 61st floor where Asuna once lived.

The main block was named «Panareze». It was designed as a man-made island in the center of a large lake, connected to innumerable isles through floating bridges stretching out in all directions.

Asuna gazed at the festive Panareze from across the lake, and placed her head on Kirito's shoulder.

The two of them currently sat on the south coast of an isle slightly north of the main block. The large tree behind them was budding, small waves washed at their feet. Warm wind blew over the lake even though it was winter, and the grass around them rustled.

"Hey, do you still remember? The first time you went to my house." She lifted her face and asked, Kirito replied with a slight smile.

"I'm not boasting, but I'm confident that I have poor memory—"

"Eh—"

"—However, I still remember that time clearly."

"...Really?"

"Of course. At that time, I got a super rare ingredient, and Asuna made a stew out of it. Ah... that meat was so delicious... Even now, I often think of it."

"Really! The only thing you remember is about eating!"

Asuna pouted and hit Kirito's chest, but there was still a hint of a smile in her voice.

"...Well, I also think about it often."

"What, you have no right to complain about others... Hey, that stew, is it possible to recreate in the real world?"

"Uh~ huh... It's basically similar to chicken, perhaps if I work on the sauce... Still, it's probably better for it to remain in our memories. A dish you can never taste again, isn't that great?"

"Mmn, yeah, that's true."

Looking at Kirito nodding slightly regretfully, Asuna once again smiled. Kirito also smiled, and said as though he suddenly thought of something:

"Ah, right... Hey."

"What is it?"

"We've unknowingly saved up quite a bit of Yurudo, when the update with the 60th floor is introduced, why don't we buy a house in Salemburg? Asuna's home was there in the past."

"About that~"

Asuna thought about Kirito's proposal for a while, and shook her head.

"Well, no. I don't really have any good memories in that place. Use the money to help Agil open a shop in Algade."

"Help revive that unscrupulous shop... The interest rate will be ten percent every ten days..."

"Wah, you're going too far."

They can talk forever about the memories they share of Aincrad. As they smiled and talked, Asuna noticed an increase in the number of players flying from Panareze to this isle. Everyone flew over the two of them, towards the large tree in the center of the island.

"Ah, it's almost time. I have to go."

While saying that, Asuna was still reluctant to part with the warmth against her. At that time, Kirito said with a serious expression on his face.

"Asuna. If you're going to fight with Absolute Sword..."

"...Eh?"

"Er... Well, no, that person... is very strong, really."

Hearing some stuttering in Kirito's tone, Asuna tilted her head.

"I've already heard a lot about Absolute Sword's strength from Lisbeth and the others. Moreover, even Kirito was defeated. From the beginning, I've never felt like I'd win. I just want to see that sword... Besides, I really can't believe that Kirito-kun actually lost."

"Right now there are plenty of people stronger than me. Well, even among those, Absolute Sword is special."

"Speaking of which, Lyfa said you said something during the fight. What was it?"

"Ah, about that, it's something I'm slightly concerned about..."

"What is it?"

"This and that..."

Asuna keenly noticed some kind of anxiousness in Kirito's look. Asuna was getting more and more confused, and blinked.

No matter how strong the player called Absolute Sword is, this isn't SAO anymore. Even if you don't surrender in time and lose all your HP, you can revive on the spot as long as someone casts a resurrection spell. Even if you lose experience due to the death penalty, you only have to hunt for several hours to regain it.

However, Kirito quietly said something Asuna didn't expect.

"I asked that person— You're completely a resident of this world, aren't you? Her response was a silent smile and a ferociously fast charge skill. That speed... broke the limit..."

"...That is saying, a super addicted player?"

Asuna tilted her head and asked, in response to her question, Kirito hurriedly shook his head.

"No. I'm not referring to certain VRMMO worlds, I'm talking about the entire «The Seed server»... No, that's also wrong. I should say, it's a product of the environment created by full diving... That's what I felt."

"What... does that mean...?"

"—It's better not to make a first impression so early. I want you to feel the rest yourself. I think you'd understand if you fight."

As Asuna blinked while Kirito patted her head, the sound of people landing continuously came from the tree behind them. Then, they heard a loud voice.

"My eyes just left you a little and you've run off to this kind of place!"

Hearing the sound of footsteps on grass, Asuna hurriedly lifted herself up.

Lisbeth walked out with an apron dress from behind the tree, stood with her hands on her waist, looked down at Asuna and said.

"I apologize for bothering you while you're busy, but it's almost time."

"I, I know."

Hoisting herself with the wings on her back, Asuna immediately stood up and confirmed her equipment. A jacket weaved with silvery blue threads and a skirt of the same kind. Boots and gloves made out of the skin of a water dragon. Hanging from the sword belt around her waist was a rapier with a crystal handle. Every single one of them were treasures of the highest grade that could currently be obtained. That way she couldn't blame it on equipment even if she lost.

Finishing her examination of things like the type of magical accessory she had equipped, she took a look at the clock.

There was still a bit of time before it was 3 pm in the real world. Asuna glanced at Kirito who stood at her side, turned around, looked at Lisbeth, Silica and Lyfa who were behind her, as well as Yui who was on her head and said.

"—Then, let's go."

They flew low in a row, toward the center of the unnamed island. A large hill came into view as they moved through the trees which extended into the distance. Branches stretched out in every direction from the large tree at the summit, and a large group of players had already gathered in circles at its base. A great cheer came rumbling like a tsunami.

As they noticed room in the audience and were landing, a player fell from far above accompanying a cry. He brutally fell headfirst to the tree's base, raising a large cloud of dust.

The swordsman which appeared to be a Salamander lay sprawled on the floor for a good while before finally shaking his head and jerking up. With an expression that still showed the impact from the fall, he raised both his hands and shouted.

"I've lost! I surrender! I resign!"

At the same time, a sound signifying the end of the duel rang out and the sounds of clapping and cheering became louder.

Amazing, this is already the 67th win in a row, could nobody stop that person, countless calls like that mixed with praises and gripes intertwined. Hearing those, Asuna narrowed her eyes and looked up as though to confirm the winner.

In the sunlight streaming out from between the branches of the large tree, a player's silhouette came spiraling down.

Absolute Sword was smaller than imagined. Due to the name, Asuna imagined that it would be a huge man with bulging muscles, but Absolute Sword should be considered slim. The details could gradually be seen as Absolute Sword slowly approached in the backlight.

Her skin color was milky white with a hint of purple, a characteristic unique to Imps. Her long hair was a lustrous and gorgeous purplish-black. The obsidian armor which covered her chest had a slight bulge, the blouse and windswept dress beneath that were a bluebottle violet. On her waist hung a thin, black sheath.

In front of Asuna's dumbfounded gaze, the undefeated swordswoman «Absolute Sword» quickly spun around before landing lightly en pointe. Then she lifted the corner of her skirt, placed her right hand in front of her chest and curtsied like an actress. At the same time, the men around once again whistled and cheered.

Absolute Sword nodded slightly and stood up, her face wreathed in smiles and innocently made a V sign. She was clearly shorter than Asuna. On her small face were dimpled cheeks, a slightly upturned nose and her large, flashing eyes displayed an amethyst-like radiance.

Asuna still hadn't recovered from her astonishment, and nudged Lisbeth's abdomen with her elbow.

"...Hey, Liz."

"What is it?"

"Absolute Sword — is a girl?!"

"Uh huh, didn't I mention it?"

"No you didn't! ...Ah, could it be..."

This time she glanced at the face of Kirito who stood on her other side.

"The reason Kirito lost..."

"No, it isn't."

Kirito shook his head seriously and said.

"I didn't go easy because she's a girl. I already fought really seriously. Really... At least until halfway."

"Who knows?"

Asuna haughtily turned away from him.

During this time the Salamander stood up, smiling even though he lost and shook Absolute Sword's hand before turning around and returning to a corner in the audience. The girl who wore a red hairband on her dark hair cast the lowest level healing spell on herself and looked around.

"Then, the next challenger, are there any?"

Her voice was also the high, lovable voice of a young girl. Her tone was bright and innocent, making it hard to associate with a seasoned warrior.

ALO doesn't support sex change, so the player was definitely female, but the randomly generated virtual body doesn't reflect a person's age or physique. Even so, the realisticness of «Absolute Sword»'s mannerisms makes people believe it's her real age and appearance.

'Why don't you go', 'No way, I'd get killed in seconds', conversations like those kept coming from the surroundings, but nobody signed up. This time it was Lisbeth's turn to nudge Asuna's abdomen with her elbow.

"Hey, go."

"No... Wait, I need to get into pace first..."

"You can just get into that kind of thing in a round against that child. Now, go quickly!"

"Wah."

Thump, her back was pushed, and Asuna fell several steps forward. She hurriedly spread her wings to stop falling, stood up straight and found herself looking face to face at the girl with the alias Absolute Sword.

"Miss, want to try?"

Twitchingly smiling, Asuna can't do anything but,

"About that... Well, then here I come."

Respond quietly like that. Before her fight with Absolute Sword who she imagined to be a large and ferocious man, she expected there to be a vigorous battle of words, but too many things have messed with her pace.

However, the surrounding cheers were left seething. Many people knew that Asuna was a frequent winner of the monthly tournament, and voices calling her name can be heard.

"OK!"

The girl snapped her finger and beckoned towards Asuna.

Breathing deeply, Asuna made up her mind and walked towards the center of the human wall. After the surrounding voices gradually stopped, she first confirmed the conditions of the fight.

"About that, can you describe the rules?"

"Of course. You can use magic and items if you wish. However, I (boku) will only be using this."

The girl who really suited the personal pronoun «boku» tapped the hilt of her sword with her left hand while responding. Her almost naive confidence provoked Asuna's will to fight. ^[2]

...In that case, I won't use means of restraint like long distance magic attacks either. A straightforward fight between swordswomen is what I wished for, whispered Asuna in her heart and placed her right hand on the hilt of her rapier, at that time.

Absolute Sword loudly said something even more leisurely.

"Ah, right. Miss, a fight on the ground or an aerial one, which do you like?"

Originally thinking that it'd obviously be an aerial one, Asuna was shocked and stopped unsheathing her rapier.

"...Either kind is fine?"

Absolute Sword grinned and nodded. Asuna couldn't help but wonder if it was some kind of ploy. However, there wasn't a hint of wickedness in the smile of the Imp girl. That was saying, she simply believed that she could win no matter what kind of fight it was.

If it's like this, I won't go easy. Thinking this, Asuna responded.

"Then, a fight on the ground."

"Ok. Jumping is fine, but you can't use your wings!"

Absolute Sword immediately agreed, and folded back the characteristic shadowy wings on her back. The color of those wings which were shaped like a bat's immediately faded and became almost unnoticeable. At the same time, Asuna also used the command to remove her wings: her two shoulderblades tightened up completely and were fixed there for two seconds. A jingling sound came from behind her, and she understood that her wings had disappeared.

Asuna pretty much mastered «Voluntary Flight» without a joystick on the first day she connected to ALO as a normal player, and now her aerial techniques weren't any worse than veterans who were playing since before Aincrad was patched.

Even so, as expected, the movements that permeated her body during the 2 years of fighting in SAO didn't weaken at all. In truth, fighting on the ground was difficult. Moving her toes, she felt the hardness of the ground coming from beneath her boot.

Next, Asuna confirmed the «Multicolor Pointer» of the girl who was known as Absolute Sword.

This small window automatically emerged near people your attention was focused on. Other than displaying the target's name, HP, MP and small icons for buffs and debuffs, the color of the window also showed your relationship with the target. Conditions like same race, neutral race, enemy race, friend, guild, party and so on would change its color, which was why it was called multicolor pointer.

However, since it was the first time Asuna and the girl had met, it wouldn't show her name, thus there was nothing above her HP bar. Comparatively, to the left side was a small icon. It was known as a «Guild Emblem». As its name implied, it meant that the person belonged to a guild. The emblem could be freely edited, the girl's emblem was a very cute one with a pink

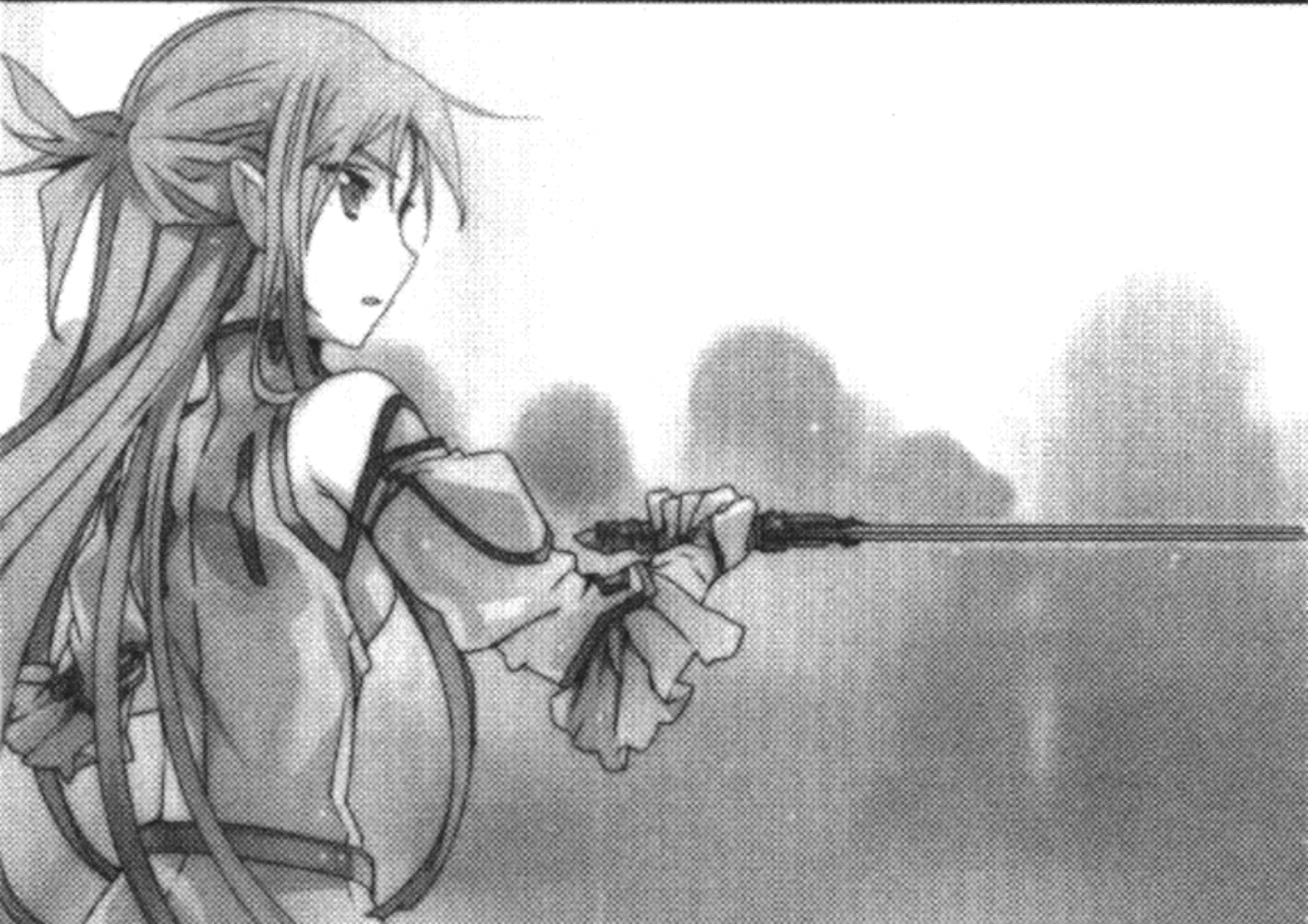
heart with two white wings spreading from its side. Asuna herself wasn't part of any guild, so there was no emblem on her pointer. Several times, she and her companions have mentioned forming a guild, but for some reason it had always stayed like that.

The girl was probably also looking at Asuna's pointer, the girl who was focused slightly away from Asuna once again looked directly at her with her beautiful, violet eyes. She smiled, waved her right hand and skillfully manipulated the system window which appeared. After that, a request for a duel appeared in Asuna's vision accompanied by a heart-stirring sound effect. The top row said—

【Yuuki is challenging you.】

ユウキ, read as Yuuki, was probably the name of that girl's character. Cute yet imposing, it was a name which really suited her.

Like in SAO, there were 3 modes selectable at the bottom of the window. Beginning from the top, they were «First Strike Mode», «Half Loss Mode» and «Total Loss Mode». In the previous Aincrad, duels were basically all done in first strike mode. Obviously losing all your HP was out of the question, even if it was half loss mode, it was possible to reduce someone's HP to the danger zone if the finishing hit was a critical hit.



But now, the obvious choice was total loss mode.

Feeling the change in times in a corner of her brain, Asuna clicked OK. The name **【Yuuki】** appeared on the girl's multicolor pointer. At the same time, the pointer she was looking at should display the name **【Asuna】** .

The window requesting a duel automatically disappeared, replacing it was a ten second timer. Asuna and the girl — «Absolute Sword» Yuuki unsheathed their swords at the same time, *ka-chink*, two clear sounds overlapped and rang.

Absolute Sword's weapon was a thin, single-handed, double-edged straight sword. It was translucent with an obsidian black hue like her armor. Judging from the radiance and details, the weapon's level was more or less the same as Asuna's rapier. That was saying, it probably didn't have the additional effects unique to rare, legendary weapons.

Yuuki placed her sword in front of her at her waist, and naturally lowered her body. In comparison, Asuna placed her right hand at the side of her body, her rapier held almost perpendicular. At the same time, the surrounding cheers ebbed away like a tide.

While she took a deep breath and breathed out, the counter on the timer reached zero.

In the instant the word **【DUEL】** flashed, Asuna stomped on the ground with all her strength. Closing the distance of about seven meters in an instant, she twisted her body towards the right.

"Ha!"

Following that short cry, Asuna's right hand shot forward like an arrow. Those thrusts filled with torque and inertia shot out twice slightly to the left of the center of Absolute Sword's body, and another thrust ingeniously shot out to her right after a short while. It was a regular skill rather than a sword skill, although it wasn't as fast, its aim was more precise. If she dodged to the right to avoid the first two thrusts, she couldn't evade the following one.

Like Asuna thought, Yuuki's body moved slightly to the right to avoid the first two strikes. As her movement stopped, she entered the striking zone of the third hit—

However, as the tip of the rapier was about to hit her chest armor, Yuuki's right hand moved indistinctly. At the same time, sparks appeared to the right side of Asuna's rapier, and the trajectory of the thrust shifted slightly.

Absolute Sword accurately parried her rapier which was thrust at an ultra-high speed, as her brain understood that, the tip of her rapier grazed Absolute Sword's armor and hit air.

Expecting a counterattack, the skin on Asuna's neck numbed. However, if she retracted her rapier right now, her posture would be rigid. Following her skill's inertia, she hardened her heart and spun to her left.

At the same time, a black light aiming for her neck leapt into her eyesight.

"——!!"

Tremors filled Asuna's body as she faced this terrifying, lightning fast speed. She gritted her teeth and twisted her body to its limit, the strength exerted by her right foot almost scraping off the surface of the ground.

The friction of the grass which grew densely at her feet was set slightly lower than that of rocks or bare earth. This value betrayed Asuna and her right foot slipped. Instantly, her body tilted abruptly.

However, luckily, Absolute Sword's sword only grazed across Asuna's chest. *Clang!* The impact passed close to her ear. If hair had hitboxes, Asuna's long, light blue hair would probably be left with half its original length. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the energy released into the air spreading out.

Asuna recovered her balance, stomped the ground with her boot and leapt to the right. She leapt with her left foot once again and stopped a good distance away.

Even though Asuna was bent low in preparation for pursuit attacks, Absolute Sword retained the same smile, stopped moving and once again raised her sword to her waist. Asuna calmed her heartbeat and smiled back — but inside, she was covered in cold sweat.

The trajectory of the thrust which came flying towards her was just a single point. Basically, you could only avoid it using footwork, but Absolute Sword accurately deflected Asuna's rapier.

Rather than the speed of her counterattack, Asuna was more speechless at her amazing reaction speed. Although she kept hearing about how

strong she was, the opponent's unexpectedly cute face put her off guard. She once suspected that the reason Kirito lost was due to negligence or discretion while fighting a girl, but that was completely undeserved. Even he wasn't able to successfully block Asuna's full power thrust even once.

Asuna once again breathed in deeply and held her breath. She was indeed a terrifying opponent, but giving up after just a single round would be a disgrace.

Unexpectedly, a sound echoed in her ear.

—What sword. That kind of thing, it's just a game...

Asuna clenched her teeth and threw away the noise in her mind. This world was already a real world, fights in this place were real battles. She must treat it as such.

As though to spur herself on, Asuna shook her rapier, raised it to her right shoulder and faced her opponent.

If normal skills won't work, then she must be prepared to risk using sword skills from now on. However, sword skills have a set recovery time, if all the hits are avoided, she will surely receive a fatal counterattack. She must think of a way to destroy her opponent's posture and create a situation where it will definitely hit. Asuna clenched her left hand.

She once again stomped on the ground and leapt, this time her mind completely clear. Something that was rarely ever felt during fights in the ALO world, the feeling of her nerves burning as her thoughts accelerated, engulfed her body.

This time, Absolute Sword also leapt forward. The smile in the corner of her mouth was gone and a radiance shone in her amethyst eyes.

The obsidian sword came howling diagonally from the upper right, Asuna pushed it aside from the left. A haircurling impact came from her right hand along with sparks and a metallic noise. Using the blocked off sword, Absolute Sword quickly swung again as though she couldn't feel the weight of her weapon, she attacked again and again. Her speed was so fast that it was impossible to react by the time you saw her attacks. Completely focusing her eyesight on her opponent, Asuna predicted the direction of her next attack from her movements and blocked or avoided it. Occasionally their swords would cross and graze each other's bodies, causing both of their HP to drop a little, but there wasn't a single clean hit.

Rapidly swinging her sword, Asuna suddenly felt uneasy.

Indeed, Absolute Sword Yuuki's attack and reaction speed were quite terrifying. Judging from speed alone, she was even above Kirito. Even so, the reason Asuna was able to persist until now wasn't only due to the large amount of combat experience she amassed in SAO, but also because her opponent's attacks were too direct. From the beginning to the end, she didn't use a single feint, which could upset the rhythm in an instant.

Asuna felt that, perhaps, Yuuki didn't have much experience fighting players. If that was the case, even if it was only for an instant, she had a chance of winning if she took her by surprise.

Entering the gap between the three-hit combo coming from her top right, top left and left side, Asuna ruthlessly entered Absolute Sword's bosom. The two of them were nearly stuck together. That way, neither of them could avoid attacks using footwork.

Asuna bent down, the rapier in her right hand pointing directly at the center of her opponent's body, and resolutely thrust forward—

Absolute Sword responded, and blocked the rapier from bottom up—

At that instant, Asuna suddenly pulled back her right hand, and at the same time, clenched her left fist and punched Absolute Sword's right side. This was a «Boxing» skill which she learned when she visited the faraway Gnome capital's training field. Even though there was no power because she didn't equip a knuckle-type weapon that it was intended for, it caused a flinch which was impossible without using a skill.

Dong, an impact came from her left fist, Absolute Sword widened her eyes in shock. This was her first and last chance. Asuna didn't hesitate and activated the four-hit sword skill «Quadruple Pain».

Asuna's rapier shone bright red and at the same time her right hand, controlled by the system, shredded the air like lightning.

Asuna was confident that the attack would hit. The opponent's posture was already destroyed and it was also impossible to avoid in terms of distance.

However. Letting the system speed up her right hand, Asuna looked at Absolute Sword's face, and tremors once again filled her body. Even though Absolute Sword's eyes were wide open, there wasn't a hint of panic in her violet eyes. Her eyes were focused on the tip of the rapier.

She could see the thrusts—?

The instant this thought crossed Asuna's mind, Absolute Sword's right hand flashed out.

Like a sword placed on a grinding wheel, a hard, scraping sound continuously rang out four times. Asuna's four-hit combo was accurately parried up, down, left and right, not a single blow hit. Asuna could only see a thin, ink-like afterimage left on Absolute Sword's sword.

Her last hit being parried, Asuna was frozen in a position with her right arm stretched out for several tenths of a second — this hopeless recovery time overtook Asuna. Absolute Sword didn't let go of this chance.

With a clang, she pulled back her obsidian sword, her sword glowing purple.

A counterattack-sword skill!

"Aaah!"

For the first time in the match, Yuuki let out an awe-inspiring cry. Then, she thrust forward with a speed that would've been very hard to avoid even if Asuna wasn't recovering from her skill, and caught Asuna's left shoulder. Slanting directly towards the bottom-right, she executed a five-hit combo without rest. All of them beautifully hit and Asuna's HP bar rapidly decreased and became yellow. She didn't remember a one-handed sword skill like that, which meant it was an «Original Sword Skill». She actually compiled such a fast five-hit combo—



While Asuna was dazed and thinking that, the light of Yuuki's sword didn't fade and she raised it to her upper-left.

It didn't end in five hits. It was still continuing. Finally being released from her skill's recovery time, Asuna pulled herself together and once again trembled.

Supposing Yuuki thrust at her another five times, there was no doubt that her HP would drop to zero. However, it was impossible to avoid.

Rather than uselessly trying to run and getting hit in the back, it'd be better to gamble on a small chance. Asuna put all her energy into her right hand and once again activated a sword skill. The only five-hit OSS which she had successfully compiled, named «Starry Tear».

Red and blue flashes interlocked. Going from Asuna's right shoulder to her bottom-left, the tip of Yuuki's sword intersected with her previous hits and made a cross.

However, Asuna's rapier finally hit Absolute Sword. Drawing the apex of a small star, the five-hit thrust skill pierced the black armor.

They finished exchanging five hits, and there was a moment of silence. Neither of them had fallen.

Absolute Sword's HP bar was reduced by more than half, and turned yellow. Whereas Asuna's HP bar entered the red zone, and there was only a little left. In the first place, Asuna, whose character data was inherited from SAO, had higher HP than ALO players. The astonishing ten-hit combo managed to actually chip almost all of it away, the power of Absolute Sword's OSS was really terrifying, however...

No. Yuuki's longsword was still releasing a violet glow, the sword skill hadn't ended.

Once again pulling back her sword, she aimed directly at the center of Asuna's body, the intersection of the cross-shaped effect.

That is saying, this is the miraculous OSS which Absolute Sword gambled on the duel? Asuna sighed deeply.

Power and speed which exceeded common sense, moreover, beauty which was even greater than those. I have no regrets losing to this kind of sword skill. Stating this in her heart, Asuna waited for the final hit.

The eleventh hit ferociously descended — but suddenly stopped right before it pierced through Asuna. The forcefully interrupted system support released a bright flash and the impact was released into the surrounding air, causing the surrounding grass to radially fall.

"—?!"

In front of Asuna's dumbfounded eyes, Absolute Sword placed down her weapon, and for some reason, quickly walked toward her. She patted Asuna's shoulder with her left hand, smiling brilliantly. Opening her lips, she vigorously said:

"Yeah, that was great! I've decided on you!!"

"Wha... Eh...?"

Asuna was already completely lost, and could only let out a dazed sound.

"How, that... What happened to the last hit of the duel...?"

"I'm already satisfied with fighting this much. Did you want to continue till the end?"

Hearing her saying that while smiling, Asuna could only shake her head. No matter what, if Absolute Sword didn't stop her last hit, Asuna's HP would've definitely been reduced to zero.

The girl who really suited the personal pronoun «boku» cheerfully nodded her head and continued speaking.

"I've always, always been looking for a strong person. This time I've finally found one! Hey, miss, do you have anything to do after this?"

"Well... uh. No..."

"Then, come with me for a while!"

Absolute Sword Yuuki returned her sword to the sheath on her waist with a clink and energetically stretched out her right arm. Asuna also sheathed her sword for the moment and uneasily grasped her hand.

At the same time, Yuuki widened her back and activated the command which spreads out her wings. The translucent, bat-shaped wings appeared, raising her body slightly.

"Ah, right."

Asuna hurriedly stretched out her shoulder blades, grew wings and kicked off the floor. Yuuki smiled once again, grasped Asuna's hand, turned around and accelerated upwards like a rocket.

"Hey, Asuna, where are you going?!"

Looking back towards the sharp voice, Asuna saw Lisbeth with a half-shocked, half-dazed expression on her face, yelling with her hand to her mouth. Lyfa, Silica and also Yui who sat on Kirito's head all looked dumb-founded, yet the black-clothed Spriggan just smiled calmly, as though he already predicted this development to some degree.

Encouraged by his expression, Asuna smiled and breathed in deeply.

"Well, about that... I'll contact you later!"

After she shouted that to Lisbeth, in front of her, Yuuki's wings released a purple radiance and she instantly entered a sharp burst of speed. With her right hand being pulled, Asuna frantically flapped the wings on her back, following the back of the young, mysterious swordswoman.

Absolute Sword flew directly south over the 24th floor's lake, through an opening in Aincrad's boundaries and into the space outside without hesitation.

"Uwah!"

At the same time, thick clouds hit Asuna's face. They continued moving forward in that pure white space for several seconds before suddenly slicing through the layer of clouds, the azure sky stretched out boundlessly in front of them.

In the bottom-right corner of her eye, she could see a green cone stretching out where they pierced through the layer of clouds. It was the top of the world tree which towered in the center of Alfheim. Looking directly below her, she could faintly see a blue surface. Judging from the circular shape scooped out from the coastline, it seemed like Aincrad was flying above the «Crescent Gulf» in Undine territory.

While Asuna was wondering about where they were going, Absolute Sword who was flying in front suddenly turned 90 degrees and started flying upward. Turning her body around, Aincrad appeared in front of her eyes,

its giant, curved body towering like a precipice. Passing through the hundred meter high floors one after another, Absolute Sword continued flying higher.

—Although you could say that, but you can only freely go in and out of Aincrad's boundary for floors already cleared. The outer limits of floors which haven't been accessed are inaccessible zones. Asuna was slightly worried and wanted to ask her in order to confirm, but right when she breathed in deeply and was preparing to shout, their angle of flight once again turned 90 degrees.

It seemed like Absolute Sword's target was the 27th floor. If Asuna remembered correctly, that was the current front line. Going through a gap in the moss-covered wall, they flew inside with a bang. Instantly, the surroundings darkened.

The 27th floor of Aincrad is a country of perpetual darkness. There were exceedingly few openings in the exterior and no sunlight shone in even during the day. Numerous stalactites unevenly hung down from the ceiling inside, and above those, there were large prismatic gems here and there, letting out a hazy blue glow. In terms of impression, it was similar to the underground of the Gnome territory in the north of ALfheim.

The imp girl, whose night vision was almost as good as a Spriggan's, pulled Asuna's hand and flew between the stalactites. From time to time, a group of «Gargoyles» came into view in front of them, but Yuuki wasn't interested in fighting, skillfully avoided the group's scouting range and continued flying.

After flying into the ravine which appeared soon after and gliding slowly for a minute or so, a small town came into sight at the bottom of the wide, circular valley. This was the 27th floor's city block, named «Ronbaru».

Alleys and stairs complicatedly criss-crossed over this town which seemed as though it was carved out of a block of rock, an orange light shining over it. Like a sole campfire burning on a frigid night, it had a calming effect.

A purple and light blue trail stretched out from Yuuki and Asuna in the darkness as they flew and slowly landed in the circular plaza in the center of the town.

The quiet BGM signifying that they've entered the city drifted into her ears, and a bit of the pot roast's fragrance tickled her nose — while Asuna was thinking about that, she landed on the stone floor with a patter.

Asuna caught her breath and looked around. Ronbaru is the city of night elves, fitting that setting, there wasn't a single large building. A small workshop, shop and inn made out of cyan stone were tightly connected together. Under the orange light, this view had a fantasy-like beauty and the liveliness of a night festival.

Back during SAO, even while they were clearing the floor, people only gathered in this town for a short while because there weren't any important facilities. Asuna also only remembered staying in this town for several days. But right now, since it was the front line, many players proudly strode around, a clashing sound coming from their armor. Everyone seemed to have a few tempers and carried the heavy atmosphere of a warrior. Seeing that, a feeling mixed with yearning and bitterness drifted into Asuna's heart.

In order to obtain the wooden house, Asuna stood at the front lines for the entire time until they've reached the 22nd floor, but she hardly ever participated in boss fights after that. She felt that the joy of «entering a new town» should be left for the adventurers of the new Aincrad to savor. Besides, her memory of the front lines weren't all happy.

After closing her eyes and lightly shaking her head in order to throw away her sentiments, Asuna looked towards Absolute Sword who stood next to her.

"...Hey, why did you bring me here? Is there something in this city?"

In response to this question, Absolute Sword smiled and once again pulled Asuna's hand.

"Before that, let me introduce my companions first! This side!"

"Ah, wait..."

Following the back of Absolute Sword who suddenly started running, Asuna entered one of the narrow alleys that extended radially from the plaza.

Climbing up and down the small steps, passing through a bridge and going through a tunnel, they arrived in front of what looked like a hotel. Knocking aside the pot-shaped sign made out of cast iron with «INN» written on it, they entered through the door. They passed through a napping, bearded NPC and stepped deep into the pub and restaurant. At this moment—

"Welcome back, Yuuki! Did you find one?!"

The voice of a clamorous boy met the two.

Five people sat at a round table in the center of the tavern. There weren't any other people. Absolute Sword walked in front of them, quickly turned around and faced Asuna, happily spread out her right hand, straightened her chest and said:

"—Let me introduce you. This is my guild, my companions from the «Sleeping Knights»."

She turned around once again, and this time motioned at Asuna.

"And this is—..."

Her words suddenly stopped there. Yuuki shrunk back, rolled her eyes and adorably stuck her tongue out.

"...Sorry, I still haven't asked what your name was."

The five players splendidly fell into their chairs with a clatter. Seeing this, Asuna couldn't help but laugh and after a curtsy, she told them her name.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Asuna."

And then, to Asuna's far left, a short Salamander boy stood up with considerable verve. Swinging his orange hair tied in a braid at the back of his head, he said with a spirited voice.

"I'm Jun! Hi Asuna-san!"

To his side was a huge Gnome man. The beaming eyes beneath his wavy, sand-colored hair made him look amiable. He retracted his protruding stomach, bowed, and said his name with a leisurely tone.

"Ah, about that, my name is Thatch. Please treat me kindly."

The next to stand up was a skinny Leprechaun youth. His tidy, brass colored hair and round, iron-rimmed glasses gave him the impression of a student. He widened his small eyes, bowed and blushed while introducing himself in a flustered manner.

"I, I am, that, that is, my name is Taruken. Please advise me... Ouch!!!"

The wail at the end of the sentence was due to the female player sitting to his left kicking him hard in the shin with her boots.

"Enough, Taru, stop being like this! You're always like this in front of girls!"

Saying this with an imposing and agitated tone, she rose from her chair with a clatter. She widened her eyes and smiled at Asuna, scratched her black hair which extended out like the sun and stated her name.

"I'm Nori. Glad to meet you, Asuna-san."

Judging from her black skin and gray wings, it seemed like she was a Spriggan, but her thick eyebrows, lips and large physique didn't feel like a Spriggan's at all.

And then, the last one was a female Undine player like Asuna. Her long, light blue hair which was almost pure white hung down from her shoulders. The calm, deep blue eyes beneath her drooping eyelashes shone with a radiance. Her long nose, lustrous lips and surprisingly slender body completely gave off the feeling of an excellent Undine healer.

The woman stood up lithely, and calmly introduced herself.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Shiune. Thank you for coming here."

"And then—"

Finally, Absolute Sword jumped to the right, stood alongside the five people and said as her large eyes shined:

"Me, who is also the guild leader, Yuuki! Asuna-san..."

She strode forward and clenched Asuna's hands,

"Let's work hard together!"

"Work hard to... do what?"

Asuna smiled back and asked, Yuuki was somewhat taken aback and once again stuck out her tongue.

"Eh, I haven't told you yet!"

Clatter! Seeing the five of them once again collapsed in their chairs, Asuna couldn't hold it in any longer. She laughed out loud, and immediately, Yuuki and the others also cheerfully laughed.

When she finally stopped laughing, Asuna once again looked around at the members of the «Sleeping Knights»— And then, she felt a slight chill behind her back.

They were all terribly strong. Asuna could determine this from every one of their movements. These six people were all fully used to moving in the VR world. If they took up arms, all of them would probably be about as strong as Absolute Sword.

Asuna, and probably also Kirito, Liz and the others, were completely ignorant about such a powerful group's existence. If they also transferred over from a different world like Absolute Sword, then they must have been a famous group in the VR world they came from.

What was the reason they moved to ALO, throwing away their familiar characters and all their items... While Asuna was wondering about this, Absolute Sword — Yuuki, who finally stopped laughing, scratched her head which was decorated by a red hairband and embarrassedly said.

"Sorry, Asuna-san. I brought you here without even telling you why. I was exhilarated that I finally found someone almost as strong as I am, and just... That is, I'll ask you for a favor once again. I... Please help us!"

"Help... you?"

Tilting her head and repeating this, Asuna thought up various possibilities in an instant.

It probably wasn't simply helping hunt for money, items or skill points. The guild was already at such a high level, just adding Asuna shouldn't make much of a difference.

Similarly, it's hard to believe that they're aiming for something like a specific rare item or residence. It's different from SAO where information itself was traded for a high price, piles of information on ALO was freely published on external sites. If you referred to those and got down to it, almost any item can be obtained eventually.

It's worth noting that the «Strength» Absolute Sword was looking for wasn't purely numerical, it also included the know-hows of combat. That's needed more for battles against players rather than monsters. Moreover, since she even introduced her guild, it's a large-scale battle rather than one-to-one duels like those which Absolute Sword has been carrying out up till now— Simply put, it's a battle without rules against another guild.

Considering this, Asuna lightly bit her lips and anxiously said.

"About that... If you need help in a conflict against another guild, I'm sorry..."

In battles against players where the rules in competitions and system rules in duels are removed, a sense of aberration always remained. Of course, players who won't let go after a moment of conflict are a minority, but the possibility that it'd bring trouble in the future to her friends and not just Asuna herself cannot be ruled out.

So even if Asuna encounters people acting unreasonably while hunting, she won't raise her sword against them.

In order to explain this as concisely as possible, Asuna once again opened her mouth. However, Absolute Sword's eyes widened for a moment before she immediately shook her head.

"No, it isn't, we're not doing something like fighting against others. About that... that, we... maybe you'd laugh..."

Lowering her head, Absolute Sword embarrassedly pursed her lips, looked up at Asuna and said something unexpected.



"...About that, we want to defeat this floor's boss."

"I see... Huh?!"

Asuna voice blurted out, this was completely outside her expectations. She originally thought that she'd hear a goal even worse than a conflict between guilds, but it turned out to be clearing the floor's boss, an extremely normal and upright goal. The players which currently stayed at the front line doubtlessly had the same goal.

"The boss...? The boss in the innermost part of the dungeon...? Not a Named Mob which respawns at a definite time?"

"Ah, yes. The one which can only be defeated once."

"I see... Is that so... a boss, huh~"

Asuna silently glanced at the faces of the other five guild members, they were all blinking and waiting for her response.

In other words, they want to join a guild which was formed specifically in order to defeat floor bosses, a «clearing guild». They just transferred over and didn't have any connections, so they're asking for her to help introduce them to veteran groups— Is that the case?

"About that... Well, Ze... No, Yuuki, since you're so strong..."

This development was slightly outside her expectations, Asuna closed her eyes, changed her way of thinking and considered the actual possibility. Among the players who were currently at Aincrad's front lines, around 80% of them were native to ALO and 20% came from SAO. Right now the groups from ALO and SAO have made peace, and the clearing guild was really mixed. However, back when it was first upgraded, their relationship was very stiff. That was due to one side being the first game to use AmuSphere, while the other side is the first real VRMMO, both «Fairies» and «Swordsmen» had strong egos. Like Asuna herself.

At this time, a group suddenly transferring over from another game uninvited and saying 'Let us join' can't join the raid group that easily— However, «Absolute Sword» Yuuki's strength is over the top. If the other five were at a similar level and they displayed it, it might be possible.

"Indeed... This floor's mapping is already close to the boss room, I don't know if it'd work if you suddenly asked to join the boss fight. But even if it isn't possible this time, if you join at the beginning of the next floor, with

your strength, you may be able to join the boss room's raid group... The maximum number of people in a raid is 49 people, so I don't know whether all 6 of you can join..."

When Asuna spoke while thinking and reached this point—

Yuuki once again shrunk back shyly, and said something outside Asuna's imagination.

"About that. It's slightly different from what you're saying. We don't want to join the large group... We want to win with only the six of us and Asuna-san."

"...Eh, what?!"

The loudest sound she has made since she was brought to the inn blurted out from Asuna's mouth.

The reason was very simple.

Compared to the originals in SAO, the mobs guarding the route to the next level in the new Aincrad were littered with power-ups. Of course, the substantial change in the system cannot be simply compared, but with prudence, the bosses in the past can be defeated without a single casualty, while the new bosses scatters players like dandelion seeds using extremely strong attacks and skills. They were almost irrationally strong.

Of course, the strategy used must change as well. Gathering the maximum number of people in a raid and preparing healers in expectation that there'd be many deaths is a solid strategy. Rather than one person sacrificing his life in order to deal 10 damage, more focus was placed on 10 people steadily dealing 11 damage. The last raid which Asuna participated in was the 21st floor's, even though it was such a low level and they've formed 7 parties of 7 people, there were innumerable times where they faced the danger of being wiped out.

Of course, the bosses' strength increases the higher they go. The end of the 20 floors which were opened up last Christmas can gradually be seen, she heard that the 26th floor was finally cleared by gathering the elites of several large guilds.

In other words, no matter how strong Yuuki and the others were, even if Asuna joined as well, defeating the boss with 7 people can be said to be impossible.

Asuna chose her words, and briefly explained this.

"...So... with 7 people, I think it's somewhat unlikely..."

After she finished saying this, Yuuki and the others glanced at each other and for some reason, all of them laughed embarrassedly. Yuuki spoke up as their representative.

"Yeah, there's absolutely no way. Actually, we also challenged the 25th and 26th floor's boss."

"Eh?! With... With just 6 people?!"

"Yes. We did try pretty hard... but our MP and HP potions can't keep up no matter what. While we were raising money around and about, the boss was defeated by the large group."

"Ah... is that so... You're serious."

Asuna once again looked closely at the faces of the 6 of them.

It can definitely be considered a foolhardy challenge, but she didn't dislike their spirit. Players who were used to games can distinguish what's possible and what's not, and would give up impossible things immediately. The rising will to challenge of the members of the «Sleeping Knights» reflected something extremely fresh — and slightly nostalgic in Asuna's eyes.

"But... Why? Why are you unwilling to go with other guilds and have to beat the boss alone?"

Of course, you can obtain an abnormal amount of money, rare equipment and items by defeating the boss with just one guild. She felt that this kind of incentive doesn't suit the 6 of them though.

"About... About that."

Yuuki widened her amethyst-colored eyes, and moved her mouth as though to say something. However, she didn't say anything. As though there was something stifling her, she opened and closed her mouth several times, like she can't find the proper words.

At this moment, the tall Undine next to Yuuki named Shiune spoke up to help her.

"About that, let me explain. Before that, please have a seat."

The 7 people including Asuna sat down around the table, and a NPC brought them the drinks they've ordered. Shiune gently crossed her fingers on the table, and started speaking in a quiet voice.

"Perhaps Asuna-san has already noticed, but we didn't meet in this world. We met in an online community outside of games... and immediately got along and became friends. It has already been... around two years."

Shiune eyelashes fell as though reminiscing, and stopped talking for a moment.

"We were really the best of friends. Together, we went to many different worlds, and undergone various adventures. However, regretfully, we can only continue to journey together up until this Spring. Everyone... is busy due to various reasons. So we decided that before we disband, we will create a memory we definitely will not forget. In the innumerable VRMMO worlds, we will find the most joyful, most beautiful, most exciting world and work together to finish something there. So we continuously transferred to various places, and this was the world we found."

Shiune looked around at her companion's faces. Jun, Thatch, Taruken, Nori and Yuuki, the faces of all five of them were gleaming, and they nodded. Shiune also smiled gently, and continued speaking.

"This world— Alfheim, the home of elves, as well as the floating city Aincrad, is fantastic. All of us will never forget about the time we've spent flying in the beautiful towns, forests, plains, the world tree — and also around this city. There is one more thing we want to do... We want to leave our footprints in this world."

Shiune's blue, slightly closed eyes glowed with a serious radiance.

"If we defeat the boss, we can leave our names on the «Swordsmen's Stele» in the Black Iron Prison inside the 1st floor's «Starting City»."

"Ah..."

Asuna's eyes widened for a moment, and nodded. She almost forgot about this, but the names of the players who have defeated the boss will be recorded in the Black Iron Prison. Asuna herself has her name left on the 21st floor's column.

"About that... Even though it's just for self-satisfaction, we want our names etched there no matter what. However, there's one problem. If a single

party defeats the boss, the names of all the members will be recorded, but if there are multiple parties, only the name of the leaders will be left."

"Ah... Is that so. Yes, it's definitely like that."

Asuna responded while thinking about the interiors of the Black Iron Prison.

The «Swordsmen's Stele» was a 3D object inside the virtual world, so its size is limited. They need to reach the 100th floor in the end, there's not enough space to record the names of all the raid members for all the floors. At most, only 7 players' name is etched for every floor. So, like Shiune said, all the member's name can be etched on the stele if one party defeats the boss, while in a raid only the party leaders will be recorded.

Shiune paused for a moment as though waiting for Asuna to understand, then lightly nodded and continued speaking:

"In other words, if we want to leave the names of all the members of the «Sleeping Knights», we can only challenge it with a single party. We tried desperately on the 25th and 26th floor, but no matter what, we always fail by a finger's breadth... Then, after discussing it together, we decided. The upper limit of a party is 7 people, there was still one space. Even though it's presumptuous, we decided to find someone who's at the same level or stronger than Yuuki, who is the strongest among us, and ask that person to join our party."

"So that's it... This was what it was all about."

Asuna took a deep breath, and her gaze fell on the white tablecloth.

Leaving their names on the 『Swordsmen's Stele』. This wish was understandable.

Not only VRMMOs, but things like online games require a lot of time from players, many people quit in spring due to reasons like going to a higher level of education or employment. Inevitably, a lot of intimate guilds which have continued for many years can do nothing but disband. Wanting to etch this memory on this monument which will continue to exist as long as this world lasted was natural.

Not to mention others, Asuna herself doesn't know how long she can continue to play ALO. If her mother took an even stronger approach, it was possible that she'd be forbidden from even using the AmuSphere. Wanting

to spend every minute and second on something meaningful since the time remaining was limited, this thought of hers was the same as theirs.

"...How about it? Will you agree? Not much time has passed since we just transferred over, so we might not be able to prepare enough gifts as thanks..."

Asuna stretched out her hands and stopped Shiune from operating a trade window to hint at the amount.

"Ah, no, since the number of places requiring funding are as numerous as mountains, this money is better left with you. I can just take whatever the boss drops as a reward..."

"So, you'll agree?"

The faces of Shiune and the other five glowed. Looking at their expressions in turn, Asuna gave up thinking about how it ended up becoming this kind of situation. At first, she was just slightly interested in the rumors of the mysterious swordmaster «Absolute Sword». Then she was absently brought from the competition grounds to the front lines, introduced to Yuuki's companions and was even invited to challenge the floor's boss with her. This all happened in less than an hour. The person who pulled Asuna into this jet-like development, «Absolute Sword» Yuuki, widened her sparkling, amethyst-colored eyes as much as possible and was waiting for Asuna's response. You can say that she's impatient, and you can say that she's unyielding, but this kind of strange encounter was also one of the joys given by VRMMOs. The most important thing is — deep in her heart, one hazy yet definite premonition sprouted. She can definitely become good friends with these mysterious swordsmen.

"About that... Wait a moment."

It was because of this that she can't deal with it casually. Asuna once again took a deep breath, fixed her gaze on the glass on the table and calmed her slightly chaotic thoughts. She put her doubts and shock aside, and focused her thoughts on Yuuki and the other's lofty goals for a moment.

A long time ago, as the sub-leader of a guild which no longer exists, Asuna planned the raids on many bosses.

She can't remember how many hours she spent discussing with other guilds and solo players, roaring at each other, and even prostrating and

begging for help when there weren't enough people. She worked so hard because in that world, there was one requirement which must be kept. There can't be a single death.

But now, everything has changed. There was only one obligation and right which players in this elves' home had, and that was to enjoy. Can you enjoy the game if you tell yourself that you can just retreat if you have no chance of winning? Yuuki and the others have already challenged the bosses of the 25th and 26th floors with only 6 people, and it seems like they did pretty well.

Rather than thinking about what happens if you fail, just go without thinking about anything first. She hasn't played in such a rash way for a long time. Even if they were wiped, the only thing they lost was a little experience.

"...If we're going to do it, let's do it. This time, put aside things like success rate."

Asuna lifted her face, and mischievously smiled. At the same time, a smile bloomed on Yuuki's adorable face. In the tremendous cheers of her five companions, she leaned forward and grasped Asuna's right hand from the table.

"Thank you, Asuna-san! Even in the very beginning, when we fought each other with swords, I knew you would say this!"

"Call me Asuna."

Asuna smiled and responded, and Yuuki in turn, smiled and said.

"Then you should also call me Yuuki!"

After shaking hands with the five people who hurriedly stretched out their hands and drinking a toast with newly ordered fruit beer, Asuna asked Yuuki a question which suddenly came to her mind.

"Speaking of which, Yuuki-sa... Yuuki, you were looking for a strong person through duels, right?"

"Ah, yes."

"If that's the case, there should have been lots of strong people before me. Specifically, a Spriggan dressed in black who uses one-handed swords, do

you still remember him? I feel that that person would probably be more useful than I am..."

"Ah—..."

Yuuki remembered about Kirito with just that. She kept nodding, and held her arm with a complicated expression for some reason.

"I remember. That person was also really strong!"

"Then... Why didn't you ask him for help?"

"Yeah..."

Yuuki was unusually silent, and a mysterious smile flashed across her face.

"As I thought, that person won't do."

"Why... Why is that?"

"He realized our secret."

Yuuki and Shiune didn't seem to want to say anything more about this, and there was no way to learn more. Perhaps this «Secret» is related to Absolute Sword Yuuki's outstanding strength, Asuna thought about this, but she can't see what Kirito noticed at all.

While she tilted her head and thought, the Leprechaun Taruken spoke up as though to change the topic.

"Then... the specifics of the raid, how... how are we going to organize it?"

"Ah... Let me think..."

Asuna washed down the questions stuck in her mouth with fruit beer, and raised her index finger.

"First of all, the most important thing is to understand the boss' attacks. Avoid when you should avoid, block when you should block and attacking with all your strength when you should attack, that way we might have a chance of winning. The problem is, how we are going to get information on this... It's probably pointless even if we ask the large guilds which specialize in hunting bosses. I think that we have to challenge it once with the premise that we'd be wiped."

"Yeah, we're fine with that! Only... The previous floor, and also the one before that, it gets defeated by other guilds immediately after we get wiped."

Yuuki showed a downcast expression, and the young Salamander boy Jun across the table frowned and continued.

"It has already ended when we got there again three hours later. Perhaps I'm just worrying too much... but I keep getting the feeling that they're waiting for us to fail..."

"Really..."

Asuna placed her hand next to her mouth and thought. Recently she heard rumours about disputes over raids as well. They were mainly about the large guild being too peremptory, but would this kind of group pay attention to a guild with only 6 people? However, this information cannot be ignored.

"Right, for the moment, we should make preparations for challenging the boss immediately after we're wiped. When does everyone have time?"

"Ah, sorry. Taruken and I aren't free at night. How about tomorrow at one in the afternoon?"

The tall Spriggan Nora scratched her black hair and apologized.

"Yeah, I have no problems with that. Then, let's meet in this inn tomorrow at one?"

OK, I understand, everyone responded in various ways. Facing the nodding «Sleeping Knights», Asuna once again smiled, and loudly said.

"—Let's try our best!"

Asuna stroked Yuuki's head while Yuuki kept talking about how thankful she was. She reluctantly left the inn, and first returned to where Lisbeth and the others were. They would probably be startled by this unexpected result, Asuna's heart pounded as she walked quickly towards the teleport gate in Ronbaru's plaza.

Relying on her unreliable memory as she passed through alleys, the festive plaza finally appeared in sight, at this moment.

Beep, as though the power switch was pressed, the world darkened. All her senses disappeared, Asuna was left in complete darkness.

Chapter 4

As though falling into a bottomless pit, she was assaulted by the sensation that she was rapidly falling.

The world abruptly turned 90 degrees and she suddenly felt a pressure against her back. Right afterwards, her five senses reconnected with a crash, causing Asuna's entire body to stiffen.

Her eyelids twitched a couple of times as she laboriously opened her eyes which were blurred by tears, and she saw the ceiling of her room.

Finally, she felt the soft feeling of her familiar bed coming from behind her back. Repeatedly breathing shallowly a couple of times, the confusion in her nervous system gradually went away.

What in the world happened? Was there a momentary power failure, or did her AmuSphere malfunction – She thought about this, and finally took a deep breath. Asuna felt that it was rather strange that there was the scent of a perfume which she doesn't use in the air, she held herself up with her arm and immediately opened her mouth dumbfounded.

Her mother stood at her bedside with a terrible expression, her right hand holding a light gray wire. This was the power cord that should've been connected to the DC port of the AmuSphere which Asuna wore on her head. The reason she disconnected abnormally was because Kyouko unplugged the machine's power source. Understanding this, Asuna didn't hold back her flustered voice.

"What... What are you doing, mom!"

However, Kyouko frowned deeply and silently looked at the north wall. Asuna followed her line of sight and noticed the hands of the embedded clock, it was around five minutes past 6:30.

Asuna can't help but bite her lips, and Kyouko finally opened her mouth.

"Mother has already said so when you were late for dinner a month ago. The next time you play this game until you're late, I'll cut off the power source."

Facing the overly cold tone which seemed to be flaunting her victory, Asuna almost reflexively shouted back. However, she lowered her head

and desperately swallowed the impulse, and said with a quiet, quivering voice.

"... Forgetting the time is my mistake. However, you didn't have to cut off the power source. If you shake my body and shout in my ear, I'll receive an alarm inside..."

"When I did this in the past, didn't it take another five minutes before you to opened your eyes?"

"That's... Moving away, saying goodbye, various things like that..."

"What goodbye? You're placing partings in that kind of incomprehensible game over actual promises? Don't you feel sorry for the housekeeper if the food she painstakingly prepared goes cold?"

—The other person is real even if it's inside a game, moreover, isn't mother the one who makes a phone call before going to university and completely wastes the food – many similar retorts flashed across her mind. However, Asuna once again lowered her head and deeply breathed out her trembling breath. What came out of her mouth was just a short sentence.

"... Sorry. I'll pay attention next time."

"There won't be a next time. Didn't I already tell you, the next time you're negligent because of that thing, I'll confiscate it. Besides..."

Kyouko curled her lips slightly, and glanced at the AmuSphere which was still on Asuna's head.

"Mother really doesn't understand you. Didn't you already waste two valuable years because of that strange machine? Don't you feel disgusted just looking at it?"

"This... is different from Nerve Gear."

Muttering this, she removed the two metal rings from her head. Reflecting on the SAO event, AmuSphere was filled to the brim with safeguards, but she immediately felt that it was useless to explain. Moreover, even if the hardware was different, it's true that Asuna fell into a vegetative state for two years due to a VRMMO. During that time, Kyouko was also very worried and was once even prepared for Asuna's death. She had to understand, understand why her mother hated the machine.

Asuna kept quiet, Kyouko let out a large sigh and turned towards the door.

"Let's eat. Change your clothes and come down right away."

"... I'm not going to eat today."

Even though she felt sorry for the housekeeper Akiyo who prepared dinner, she really didn't want to eat face-to-face with her mother.

"Do what you want."

Lightly shaking her head, Kyouko walked out of the room. Once the door closed with a click, Asuna stretched her hand towards the control panel and changed the mode to rapid ventilation in an attempt to drive away the remaining fragrance of her mother's strong cologne, but it continued to linger annoyingly for a long time.

The excitement from meeting «Absolute Sword» Yuuki, her fascinating companions and the foreboding of a new adventure vanished like a snowball exposed to sunlight. Asuna stood up, opened her wardrobe, pulled out a pair of faded jeans with a hole around the knee and stretched her leg into it. She put on a rather thick cotton hoodie, and wore a white down overcoat over it. These were one of the few clothes which weren't chosen by her mother.

Quickly tidying her hair, she grabbed her purse and mobile and quickly walked out of her room. As she walked down the stairs, put on her shoes in the foyer and was about to open the heavy door, a sharp voice came from the panel set in the wall to her side.

『Asuna! Where are you going at this kind of time?!』

However, Asuna didn't reply, she turned the handle before her mother could lock the door remotely. The instant she opened the door, metal bars flew out from both sides, but Asuna just managed to leap outside first. The damp, ice-cold night air hit her face.

Quickly crossing the road, she exited the courtyard from the door next to the main gate and finally let out a large breath. The air she breathed out turned white and floated before her eyes before gradually thinning and disappearing. She pulled up her overcoat's zipper, put her hands in her pocket and rushed towards the Miyanosaka station of the Tokyu Setagaya Line.

She wasn't running away from home, although she ran outside as though to lash at her mother, Asuna understood that she was being nothing but

childish and rebellious. This anxiety further increased the powerlessness she felt in her heart.

Arriving at a residential area with large, contiguous houses, Asuna stopped in front of a small children's park which stood alone. Sitting on a reverse U-shaped metal pipe at the entrance, she took out her mobile from her pocket.

She slid her finger across the screen, and called out Kirito – Kazuto's page from her phone book. Asuna put her finger on the call button, but closed her eyes and lowered her head in the end.

She wanted to call Kazuto and tell him: Bring an extra helmet and come pick me up on your motorcycle. Sitting on the back seat of the small, noisy yet fast motorcycle, tightly holding Kazuto's waist, and speeding straight forward towards anywhere in the new year's empty highways. If it's like that, the confusion in her mind would surely disappear right away, like when she's flying full speed in Alfheim.

However, if she saw Kazuto now, she'd definitely be unable to hold back her emotions and would weep while telling him everything. About how she must transfer schools. About how she might not be able to go on ALO again. The cold reality which had thrust Asuna in a set direction since she was young, and herself who couldn't do anything against it – in other words, she'd tell him everything about her weakness which she had hidden up till now.

Asuna removed her finger from the mobile's button, and quietly pressed the sleep button. After grasping it tightly once, she returned it to her pocket.

She wanted to be strong. A strong will which won't waver for even a moment. The strength to not rely on her fosterers and head towards the direction she hoped for.

But at the same time, a voice cried out that she wanted to be weak. She wanted to be able to not mask herself, and be a weakling which can cry when she wanted to cry. A weakling which can ask others to hug her, protect her, help her.

Snowflakes began to fall. They hit her face, immediately melted and streamed down. Asuna lifted her face, and silently watched the scattered white dots falling in the pale dusk.

Chapter 5

"So, Yuuki, Jun and Thatch are the close-ranged, Taruken and Nori are mid-ranged and Shiune is support."

Asuna rested her chin on her hand, and looked around at the geared Sleeping Knights. They wore light, ordinary clothes when they introduced themselves yesterday, but now they've all changed into Ancient-level equipment.

Like yesterday, «Zekken» Yuuki had a black half-armor and a narrow longsword equipped. The Salamander Jun was outfitted with a copper-red full plate that did not match his short stature, and a great sword almost as tall as him hung on his back.

The large Gnome Thatch was similarly equipped with thick plate armor and carried a large, door-like shield. His weapon was a heavy-looking hammer with protrusions all around.

Taruken, the Leprechaun with glasses, wore a copper-yellow light armor on his rickety body, his weapon was a terrifyingly long lance. To his side stood the sister-like Spriggan Nora, equipped with comfortable, nonmetallic armor and a long iron rod that almost touched the ceiling.

The only one who looked like a caster, the Undine Shiune wore a cleric-styled, white and navy-blue robe, a hat which puffed out like a cake, and carried a thin silver staff in her right hand. Overall, it was a well-balanced party, but if something had to be said, it was slightly weaker in the support department.

"As such, it'll probably be better if I join the back row."

Asuna decided to change her weapon to a short staff which boosted magic. As she spoke, she took off her rapier along with the sword belt on her waist, while Yuuki shrunk back apologetically.

"Sorry, Asuna. You have to linger in the back even though you're such a good rapier user."

"No, I can't tank anyways. Comparatively, Jun and Thatch will need to get knocked around, so the two of you better be prepared."

She smiled mischievously, and looked towards the heavily armored two. The largely physically different Salamander and Gnome glanced at each other, and pounded their chests at the same time.

"Ye-yeah, leave it to us!"

Hearing Jun's high-spirited yet stammered words, all of them laughed out cheerfully.

January 8th, 2026. Wednesday.

It was the last day of Winter vacation. Asuna had agreed to go to the inn at the 27th floor's main block «Ronbaru» at 1 pm and meet the Sleeping Knights once again. Naturally, their goal was to challenge the boss in the deepest part of the dungeon together.

Asuna understood that they had greater expectations for her to provide a strategy which made good use of everyone's talents instead of just statistical fighting ability. Yuuki and the others were all probably equal or better than Asuna in pure strength. However, Asuna had knowledge and experience which they lacked.

Right now, she first had to confirm the details on everyone's builds and equipment, and decide on a basic formation.

Deciding to join the back row, Asuna opened her item window, unequipped her rapier, placed it inside and exchanged it with a staff. It had the appearance of a branch, and there were even leaves at the tip. Although it looks rather shabby from just a glance, in truth, it was a branch taken from the very top of the World Tree. In order to obtain it, one must escape the ferocious attacks of a giant guardian dragon.

"Then,"

Asuna says as she taps the floor with her wand.

"Let's go take a look at the Boss room!"

They exited Ronbaru's inn together and took off into the perpetual night.

As expected of the Sleeping Knights, all of them were capable of voluntary flight, and Asuna once again admired the smoothness of their actions. They didn't seem like people who've just transferred over to ALO at all. Rather than simply being accustomed to VRMMOs, she had to say that

they were highly adept at its root, the Full Dive technology. It's true that there'd be a very small number of players who were like that, but despite her vast gaming experience, she only knew very few personally.

What kind of events caused the formation of the guild, to bring together 6 people like this. Thinking about it, today was January 8th, and people start going to school or work in general. Asuna's school had relaxed lesson plans so the third semester didn't start until tomorrow, but normally, it should be rather difficult to get all 6 members of the guild to meet up on a day like this.

Putting their outstanding strength into consideration, it'd be reasonable to come to the conclusion that they're an extremely obsessed group which spent everything they had on the game. However, Asuna felt that this wasn't the case. On the Sleeping Knights' faces, she didn't see the intense self-depreciation which those guilds couldn't erase. All of them enjoyed the game extremely naturally.

Asuna thought about the kind of people they were in real life which was something which she never cared about in the past. Yuuki, who was flying in front, cried out in her usual, spirited voice while Asuna was thinking.

"I can see it, the dungeon!"

Looking intently, opposite the unbroken rows of mountains, a large tower can be seen. The cylindrical tower extends upwards towards the bottom of the next floor. Many crystal hexagonal prisms about the size of small houses stretched out from the base of the tower, hazily illuminating the tower with a blue phosphorescence. At the bottom of the tower, the entrance to the dungeon opened suddenly, leading into the darkness.

They stopped and hovered for a moment, checking for the silhouettes of monsters or other parties around the entrance.

Of course, she has already informed Lisbeth and the others about today's «Sudden Boss Raid». They were all shocked when they heard about «Zekken»'s unexpected request, but they also volunteered to help immediately. Asuna was very glad, but their ultimate goal was to create a final memory together. Since that was the case, it was better not to stir things up too much. Her friends immediately understood her considerations and filled her inventory to the limit with potions they owned before watching her leave.

Kirito, wearing a profound expression since the beginning of the incident, seemed to be deep in thought for an instant, but still encouraged her with a smile and helped persuade Yui not to follow her. In a certain sense, Asuna aiding another guild could be considered an act of betrayal, but her friends still cheered her on. In her heart, Asuna once again thanked those friends of hers, and slowly descended towards the dungeon.

Upon landing upon the slate-gray ground, Asuna copied the six of them and looked up at the giant tower. Tens of times would not even be enough to cover the number of times she had seen this tower stretching towards the upper floors in this manner if counting from the era of the former SAO, but its undeniably majestic figure never failed to overwhelm in a way different from when gazing upon it from the sky.

"... Then, like we've discussed, let's try our best to avoid fights with normal mobs and advance."

As Asuna spoke, the faces of Yuuki and the others tensed as they nodded silently. They stretched their hands towards their waist or behind their back, and unsheathed their weapons with a clink.

The Undine Shiune, who was skilled in magic, lifted her silver staff and cast several buffs successively. The bodies of the seven of them were enveloped in light, and several status icons lit up to the right below their HP bars. After that, the Spriggan Nora cast a spell, providing all of them with night vision. Asuna had also learned a couple of buffs, but Shiune's skill level was higher, so she left it to her.

After their preparations were completed, they once again glanced at each other and nodded. They entered the dungeon, starting with Yuuki in the van.

Shortly after going through the entrance, the natural cave gave way to a slate tiled, man-made tunnel. The surrounding temperature also dropped noticeably, the cold, humid air brushing against Asuna's skin. They'd toiled over this back in SAO as well, but the interiors of the dungeons were unreasonably large and the monsters' levels can't be compared to those in the fields. In addition, like the dungeons on the surface of Alfheim, you can't fly inside. Even though they've already bought the map data from an information center, it'd still take them at least three hours until they reach the boss room.

—This was what she expected, however.

When in just a little over an hour, the giant door appeared before her eyes at the end of a corridor, Asuna was once again left speechless at their strength. Each of them had a good level of combat ability, but what was even more remarkable was their cooperation. Without even a single word, with just a single raised hand or a single movement from Yuuki's small body, they'd stop when they should stop, and charge when they should charge. Basically, Asuna only had to follow along at the back of the party. They only had three encounters with mobs, and under Asuna's direction, they easily lost them by killing the leader in an instant and throwing the rest of the mob into confusion.

Dumbstruck, Asuna whispered to Shiune as they headed through the corridor towards the Boss room.

"Am I... really necessary? It feels like there's almost nothing left for me to help you with."

Shiune widened her eyes and shook her head hard.

"No, that isn't the case. Due to Asuna-san's directions, we didn't step into a trap even once and had fairly few battles. We fought the enemies we've encountered directly the previous two times, and we ended up expending quite a lot by the time we got to the Boss room."

"... That's great... –Hey, Yuuki, stop."

Hearing Asuna's slightly raised voice, the three vanguards stopped walking immediately.

They were over halfway across the corridor leading to the Boss room, and the details of the terrifying decorations on the stone door can already be seen. On the two sides of the corridor stood pillars at regular intervals, but no monsters could be seen in their shadows.

Facing Yuuki and Jun who turned around in surprise, Asuna brought her index finger to her lips as she stared at the space opposite to the final pillar to the left.

The only source of illumination in the corridor came from the blue flames in the braziers at the top of the pillars. Even with Nora's night vision magic, it was still difficult to notice slight movements in the wavering shadows on the stone walls. However, intuitively, Asuna felt that something in her range of sight was wrong.

Asuna signalled them to move back and raised the staff in her right hand. She quickly formed a rather long spell, her left hand held up to chest-level with her palm faced upwards.

As Asuna finished chanting, five transparent-blue fish with wing-like fins appeared in the palm of her hand. She raised them to her face, and gently blew them in her target direction.

Immediately, the fish sprung forth one by one, swimming through the air in a straight line. This was a summon used against concealment spells, 『Searcher』. The five fish fanned out radially, and among them, two entered the flickering air Asuna was locked on to.

Blue lights scattered with a pop. The searchers perished, and inside the flickering air appeared a green membrane which swiftly melted and disappeared.

"Ah!"

Yuuki cried out in shock. Three players suddenly appeared opposite of the pillar, where there was nothing just a while ago.

Asuna quickly took another look. Two Imps, one Sylph, all of them lightly armed and equipped with daggers. Despite that, the grade of their weapons were rather high. She wasn't familiar with them, but she recognized the guild emblem displayed beside the pointer. A horse next to a shield. This was the emblem of the large, well-known guild that continuously cleared the dungeons past the 23rd floor.

In dungeons, it's inappropriate to hide when there were obviously no monsters around. Common sense dictates that this was meant for PKing. Asuna raised her staff once again in order to guard against ranged attacks, and to her side, Yuuki and the party members also readied their weapons.

However, contrary to their expectations, one of the three hurriedly raised a hand and yelled out.

"Stop, stop! We don't want to fight!"

Asuna feeling that his anxiety wasn't an act, lowered her guard and shouted back.

"Then, please sheath your sword!"

The three glanced at each other, and immediately returned their various daggers back to their sheaths. Asuna turned slightly towards Shiune and whispered.

"If they intend to pull out their weapons again, immediately cast «Aqua Bind»."

"I understand. Uwa, this is my first time PVPing in ALO. I'm really nervous."

Rather than nervous, Shiune and the others' eyes shined with excitement. With a faint, bittersweet smile, Asuna turned towards the trio, slowly walked a few steps closer and said.

"If you're not PKing.... For what purpose did you hide?"

After glancing at each other once again, the Imp which appeared to be the leader replied.

"We're waiting to meet up. It'd be troublesome if we got attacked by mobs before our companions arrives, so we hid."

"....."

Although it sounded reasonable, she couldn't shake off the feeling that something was odd. Concealment spells consumed mana at a significant rate while in use, so expensive potions must be used every few seconds. Moreover, if they managed to get to the deepest part of the dungeon, they shouldn't have any need to avoid battles with monsters.

However, she couldn't find a larger flaw in their words. Even though they could kill them and remove any potential problems, getting into a dispute with a large guild would lead to various problems in the future.

Asuna swallowed her doubt, and nodded slightly.

"Understood. –We're here to challenge the Boss. If your side isn't ready yet, can we go and challenge it first?"

"Ah, of course."

She originally thought that they'd try to dissuade them from challenging the Boss, but unexpectedly, the thin Imp answered immediately. He waved towards his two companions and the three of them retreated back beside the door.

"We'll wait here for our companions. Well, good luck, and farewell."

The Imp smiled and signaled towards his Sylph companion. The Sylph nodded once, raised his hands and began to cast a spell in a practiced manner.

Immediately, a green vortex whirled up at the caster's feet, enveloping the three of them. When the green swirl faded out and swayingly vanished soon afterwards, nobody could be seen there anymore.

"....."

Asuna looked once again in the direction of the hidden players, but promptly shrugged and turned around to face Yuuki. Despite the tense conversation just now, the girl with the alias Zekken did not look at all afraid, her large, purple eyes sparkling as she looked towards Asuna with her head tilted.

"... Anyways, as planned, let's go and take a look inside.."

With that said, Yuuki smiled happily and nodded.

"Yes, we're finally going! Let's do our best, Asuna!"

"Don't say things like 'taking a look inside', let's charge in and blast him away."

In reply to what Jun said somewhat imposingly, Asuna can only smile and say.

"Yes, of course that's the ideal result, but you don't need to use expensive items to recover. It's fine as long as you try your best within my and Shiune's healing range, understand?"

"Yes, teacher!"

Asuna jabbed Jun's forehead as he jokingly replied, and turned around to look at the other five people in turn as she continued to speak.

"Even if you die, don't immediately respawn in town. Stay and take a good look at the Boss' attack patterns. If we get wiped, we'll return to Ronbaru's save point together. –And our formation: Jun and Thatch will focus on tanking in the very front, occasionally using provoke to generate hate. Taruken and Nori will attack from the two sides. Yuuki will attack freely and flank the Boss if possible. Finally, Shiune and I will provide support from the back."

"Understood."

As their representative, Thatch responded with a deep voice.

After Shiune swiftly renewed all their buffs, the two vanguards moved forward. Thatch raised the tower shield in his left hand, shouldered the hammer in his right, stood side by side with Jun in front of the giant door and turned around and glanced at Asuna.

Asuna nodded in reply, and Jun who was similarly shouldering his greatsword held his empty left hand against the door, hunched his shoulder and pushed.

The two black, polished stone doors creaked in resistance for an instant, and a thundering rumble rang through the entire corridor as it slowly opened up towards the two sides. Inside was a complete darkness—

Just when she thought that, right next to the door, two braziers kindled with pale white flames followed soon after by two more to the left and right. With a slight delay, innumerable flames lit up tracing a circle. This light show is universal to all floors, starting from when the first brazier is lit and going until the Boss appears can be considered preparation time for the raiders.

The Boss room was completely circular. Its floor was paved with polished black stones and it was fairly open. On the innermost wall was the door which concealed the stairs that lead to the next floor.

"—Let's go!"

The instant Asuna shouted, Jun and Thatch charged into the room. The remaining five also followed and took action immediately.



Right when everyone arrived at their designated positions and readied their weapons – large, coarse polygons surged out from the center of the room. The black cube-like polygons clashed and combined to form a giant humanoid silhouette, uneven shapes formed at the edges as the amount of information increased continuously.

Finally, innumerable fragments scattered in the air and the Boss materialized.

A black giant over four meters in height. On its muscle-filled body grew two heads and four arms, and in each of its hands was a savage-looking blunt weapon.

The giant stepped forward, and the room immediately shook as though there was an earthquake. Compared to its lower body, its upper body was irregularly large; yet even though its entire body was inclined forward, its head was still considerably far above Asuna and the others.

It looked at the intruders disdainfully out of the corners of its four glowing-red eyes and let out a brutal roar. The upper arms held two battering rams like hammers high, and the two lower arms swung a thick chain strong enough to anchor a cruiser at the floor–

Chapter 6

"Aaaaaaaaaah, we lost, we lost!!"

Nora, who was the last to return, slapped Taruken in the back as she shouted cheerfully.

They were situated in a giant dome-shaped building opposite of Ronbaru's city square, the seven of them were transferred to the Save Crystal erected on the slightly lowered floor in the center of the room. Of course, this meant that they got wiped out from the 27th floor's black giant Boss' ferocious attacks.

"Ugh— even though we tried so hard..."

As Yuuki's shoulders sagged in dismay, Asuna suddenly grabbed her by the collar.

"Fue?"

Asuna dragged the surprised Yuuki along and ran to one of the room's corners.

"Everyone come over here quickly!"

Jun and the others, who originally planned to return to the inn to rest and reflect on the previous fight, ran over with their mouths opened.

There was nobody else around the «Respawn Point», but just in case, Asuna gathered everyone in a place where they couldn't be heard from the outside and said:

"We don't have time to rest. Do you remember the three people in front of the Boss room?"

"Yeah, I do."

Shiune nodded.

"They're scouts sent out by guilds that specialize in hunting Bosses, their goal is to monitor players outside the alliance that challenge them. You must have been seen by them before you entered the Boss room on the previous floor and also the one before that."

"Eh... We didn't even notice..."

"I'm afraid that their goal isn't to stop you from challenging the Boss, but to gather information. This may be a bit rude, but they're using a small guild like the Sleeping Knights as a sacrificial pawn to figure out the Boss' attack patterns and weakness. This way, they don't need to lose experience due to the death penalty and can also save quite a bit of potion costs."

At this point, the spectacled Taruken raised his right hand and asked:

"Bu-but, the door immediately closed behind us after we entered the Boss room. They, they can't even see our battle, so how do they gather info?"

"That was my oversight... Right before the battle ended, I noticed a small, gray newt squirming around Jun's feet. That's Dark Magic «Peeping» — A spell that summons a familiar that can be attached to a designated player, allowing the caster to steal a look from the player's viewpoint. The instant it's cast, an icon indicating a debuff should appear for about a second..."

"Eh, that's bad, I didn't notice it at all."

Hearing Asuna's explanation, a look of remorse covered Jun's face. Everybody softly patted him in the back.

"Don't say that, I should have warned everyone in advance. It must have been mixed in when Shiune was renewing everyone's buffs right before we entered the room. There were so many icons appearing at that time, so it's natural that you didn't notice an extra one."

"... Speaking of which, can it be..."

Yuuki's eyes widened as she clenched her hands in front of her chest and shouted:

"Both the 25th and 26th floors' Bosses getting defeated immediately after we got wiped wasn't just a coincidence!"

Even though Yuuki was fairly shocked, there wasn't a hint of anger or resentment in her voice. Once again feeling renewed respect for Yuuki, Asuna nodded and replied:

"You're probably correct. Your unrelenting attacks exposed even the Bosses' last resorts, which is why they were able to do it in one fell swoop."

"That, that means..."

Shiune furrowed her brow and whispered:

"This time we've once again acted as sacrificial pawns...?"

"How can this be..."

Right when the remaining five's shoulder were about to droop following Nora's sigh, Asuna hit Yuuki's armor.

"No, we still have a chance!"

"Eh...? Asuna, what do you mean...?"

"Right now it's around 2:30 in the afternoon, even a large alliance will have a hard time gathering dozens of people, it'll probably take at least an hour. We'll take action now — Listen up, we'll finish our discussion in five minutes, and then rush back to the Boss room within thirty!"

"Eeeh—?"

Even this group, consisting of top players, can't help but shout in astonishment this time. Looking around her at the rest of them, a smile appeared on Asuna's face — a prideful smile extremely similar to a certain someone's.

"We can do it. And — we can definitely defeat the Boss with just the few of us."

"Re-Really?"

Yuuki leaned so far forward that her nose almost crashed into Asuna, and Asuna faced her and nodded.

"All we have to do is calmly attack its weak point. This is my strategy. This floor's Boss is a Giant type. Even though its multiple arms are a little troublesome to deal with, it's still much easier to manage than atypical ones which have no real front or back. Its attack patterns include swinging down its hammers, sweeping with the steel chains and a charge with its head lowered. It'll start using a wide range breath attack at half health, and once it drops into the red it'll even use an eight-hit sword skill utilizing its four weapons..."

Asuna placed a holographic image display on the ground, switched over to the input screen and quickly drew images of the Boss' attack patterns. She then listed out ways to defend against these attacks.

"... Therefore Jun and Thatch can just disregard attacks from the steel chains and focus their attention on the hammers. Next is its weak points -- If its hammer hits the ground, it'll take about 0.7 seconds for it to recover. Nora and Taruken should take advantage of this opening to use powerful skills. Also, it has plenty of openings behind him. Yuuki can just remain behind its back and use charge type sword skills. Be careful though, its chains will also sweep behind its back. The way to defend against its breath attack...."

Since the time she worked as the sub-leader of the Knights of the Blood, this was the first time she has spoken so much in a strategy meeting. As she thought to herself, Asuna continued to rapidly explain to them her strategy, and the six of them nodded as they listened to her seriously.

Asuna felt that it was almost as though she were a school teacher, and promptly finished the strategy meeting within four minutes. She then opened up her inventory to materialize the vast amounts of potions she bought using their budget and the gifts she received from Lisbeth and the others.

All kinds of glass bottles constantly appeared on the floor with a clack. Asuna divided the health potions based on the amount of damage they received in the battle just now, and placed the mana potions in her and Shiune's bags. With that, all of their preparations were completed.

Asuna straightened her back, swept her eyes across everyone's faces once again, smiled and nodded.

"I'll repeat once again, if it's you... No, if it's us, we will definitely defeat that Boss. I, who've battled here since long ago, can guarantee you this."

Yuuki's usual brilliant, innocent smile immediately spread across her face, and she confidently said:

"My feelings were correct, it's great that we were able to have Asuna help us. Even if we fail, these feelings of mine will not change. Thank you -- Asuna."

The other five nodded in unison. Shiune, who appeared to be the sub-leader, added in her clear, gentle voice:

"I'm really thankful. I've once again ascertained that Yuuki's decision to bring you here was correct, you're the person we've long-awaited."

Asuna desperately tried to suppress the feelings welling up inside her, raised a finger and winked—

"... Words like these should be left for the afterparty. Now... once again, let's try our best!"

* * *

Once again taking flight from Ronbaru's streets, the seven of them flew to the dungeon at an indescribably fast speed. They flew out through the shortest route, and got eyed on by the field mobs. However, the gang kept on using Nori's illusions and got past the mobs as they dashed through.

They took merely 5 minutes to reach the tower, and then flew into the entrance without hesitation. They took the shortest path to the top floor. Even though they couldn't break through the monster mobs in the narrow dungeon, Absolute Sword Yuuki activated her ability at this moment and instantly sliced the enemy leader.

As the timer was set past 28 minutes, the corridor leading to the boss room finally appeared in front of them. This long and narrow passage was curled slightly to the left, and the spiral-shaped road led to the middle of the tower.

"Thank goodness. There's still 2 minutes!!"

Jun shouted excitedly and ran past Yuuki.

"Hey, wait!"

Yuuki raised her right hand and gave chase.

In that case, we should be able to disrupt the guild alliance. Thinking about this, Asuna started to run forward desperately too. The group of people continued to run in circles and up the corridor, arriving in front of the gates leading to the boss' room—

"...!!"

However, the scene in front of the gates made Asuna gulp. Jun and Yuuki, who were running in front, used their boots to scrape the ground and stopped quickly.

"Wha...What's going, on...!?"

Nori blankly muttered beside Asuna.

At the final 30m leading to the boss room, approximately 20 players blocked the way to the boss' room.

These people were of assorted tribes, but the only common point between them was that every one of them had a guild emblem beside the cursor, just like the trio that were hiding at the door.

—We didn't make it!? They unexpectedly gathered so many people so quickly at such a short time... Asuna bemoaned deep inside, but found that something wasn't right. There were still too few people to conquer a boss. 20 people, 3 parties. There wasn't enough to make 7 parties, 49 players altogether.

The members that should be taking part in this conquest were probably not here yet. It was truly daring to choose the gathering point at the deepest part of the dungeon, and one could tell that these people were rather impatient.

Asuna walked beside Yuuki, who was murmuring with a nervous voice, and whispered to her ear that was covered by the deep purple hair,

"Don't worry. Looks like we still have a chance to challenge it."

"...Really?"

Yuuki finally heaved a sigh of relief at this moment. Asuna lightly patted on her shoulder and quickly walked towards the group. The other party's stares were all focused on Asuna and company, yet they didn't show any surprise or tension. One could even say that these people were looking forward to a show that was about to begin.

Asuna ignored their expressions and stood directly in front of the crowd, saying to the male Gnome player who looked like he had the most expensive looking armor.

"Sorry, we want to challenge the boss. Can you please make way?"

However, the Gnome that folded his thick arms as if trying to display them actually said something Asuna didn't expect,

"Sorry, this place is currently sealed off."

"Sealed off...What do you mean?"

Asuna, who couldn't say anything for the time being, finally squeezed out this question. The Gnome twitched his eyebrows in an exaggerated manner, and then said in a rare calm tone,

"Our guild's going to challenge it next. We're still preparing. Just wait here for a moment."

"For a moment...how long?"

"Well, about an hour."

At this point, Asuna finally understood their intentions. They were just the scouting group assigned in front of the boss room, collecting information. Once other groups that could possibly defeat it appeared, they would try to force a physical barricade through numbers.

Recently, Asuna heard of some high level guilds creating problems by occupying hunting points, but unexpectedly, they would show such brazenly occupation. Wasn't this similar to the Army that savagely governed old Aincrad?

Asuna tried her best to suppress her anger and finally said in a calm tone,

"We can't wait for that long. It's different if you want to challenge it, but if not, please let us in."

"You're sorta right..."

But the Gnome shamelessly continued,

"But we came first. You have to get in line."

"Then you should have prepared before coming here. We have to wait for an hour even though we can attack anytime. That's unfair."

"That's why even if you grumble, I can't help out. This is the higher-ups' orders. If you have any disagreements, go over to the guild headquarters to negotiate. Our headquarters is at the World Tree city."

"IT'LL REALLY TAKE AN HOUR TO GET THERE!!"

Unable to bear with this anymore, Asuna finally shouted. She then bit her lips and took a deep breath to calm herself down.

No matter how they negotiated, it seemed that the other party didn't intend to move aside. What should they do?

They didn't know if they could strike a deal with the boss drops items and the Yield. Probably not, as the allure to beating the boss wasn't just about the drops, but also the vast skill-up points and the real reward of leaving their names on the Monument of Swordsmen. These guys probably won't accept such conditions.

If this were some other VRMMO, they could complain to the GM about such acts that defy net-gaming etiquette. However, the ideal player argument in ALO was to be settled amongst players. GMs basically only handled system errors.

The Gnome shot a glance at Asuna, who was at her wits end, and thought that negotiations were done and got ready to return to his allies.

At this moment, Yuuki, who was standing behind Asuna, shot out,

"Oi, you..."

«Absolute Sword» used that ever energetic voice to ask the Gnome that stopped and turned around,

"You mean that you don't intend to let us through no matter how we ask, correct?"

"—To be honest, that's the case."

After hearing Yuuki's direct words, the Gnome couldn't help but blink. However, he immediately regained that arrogant attitude and nodded. Yuuki merely smiled and said,

"Is that so? Can't be helped then. We can only use force."

"Wha...what!?"

"Ehh!?"

The Gnome and Asuna let out cries of shock at the same time.

ALO was truly a game that had the selling point of 'being able to attack players unconditionally in a neutral area'. All the players will resort to using their weapons to vent their dissatisfactions, and this code obviously existed in the game instructions.

However, in addition to being an actual rule, there's still some hidden taboo to attacking players. Players have to take note if they're taking on a large guild. That's because even if they win, the guild in question may send out a large-scale attack for revenge, and would sometimes even bring their resentment to the net community outside the game. Right now, not many players would challenge a large guild aside from those who were already aiming to PK at the beginning.

"Yu...Yuuki, that's..."

Asuna's mouth was wide open, yet she couldn't let out a voice as she didn't know how to explain this. However, Yuuki merely smiled and patted her on the shoulder and said,

"Asuna, some things have to be done through forceful means for the other party to understand. For example, right now, we should show them how serious we are."

"Yeah, you're right."

Behind them, Jun nodded in agreement. Asuna turned back and found that the other 5 members wielded their weapon as if it was normal.

"Everyone..."

"These people who are sealing this place off should be prepared to defend this place to the last man."

Yuuki again turned her eyes to look at the Gnome, tilted her head and said to him,

"Isn't that right?"

"Ah...erm, we..."

The petite Imp girl immediately drew her longsword at her waist right in front of the guy who hasn't recovered from the shock, and pointed it at the sky. The smile on her lips vanished, and her eyes showed a stern glint—

"Now, draw your weapon."

The Gnome that was devoured by Yuuki's presence undid the large battleaxe at his waist and easily made a posture to attack.

At the next moment, the petite Imp girl stormed through the entire corridor like a whirlwind.

"NUAA...!!"

Having finally understood what was going on, the Gnome pricked his nose and roared, moving the large axe in his hands. However, his movements were really too slow. Yuuki's obsidian longsword left a dark trail before swinging up from below and stabbed it straight into the center of the guy's chest.

"GUU!!"

Yuuki used this hit to make the Gnome, who was much more muscular than her, lose his balance. She then added on with a straight uppercut. The longsword let out a heavy sound, slashed into the Gnome's shoulder, and caused the HP bar to decrease drastically.

"NUOOOHHH!!"

The guy finally let out a roar of anger and raised his battleaxe as he got ready to swing it down at Yuuki. This player was really a player who's a squad captain of a famous guild as his attacks were really fast. However, «Absolute Sword» Yuuki merely continued to swing the sword in her swords without hurry.

DING! A sharp metallic sound rang, and the trajectory of the axe was deflected slightly, grazing past Yuuki's red hair by several centimeters above the head. Normally, weapons can only use the «Parrying» skill when facing weapons of similar weight. However, Yuuki's thin longsword that looked no different from a rapier deflected the large battleaxe. This was due to the lightning-quick swinging speed. It's impossible to be so agile unless the player avatar, nerves and the AmuSphere that links them both are all as one.

How much experience did she have to gain just to reach that level? Asuna looked really amazed as she watched Yuuki fight in front of her. At this moment, Yuuki's sword started to let out a blue glow. She activated a sword skill.

The Gnome warrior's feet were unstable as he was parried by a full-force attack, and a stab, a horizontal slash, a slice down and an uppercut; four attacks in all exploded as they were aimed at his face. The light blue the tip of the sword drew out surrounded the Gnome's body and let out an intense glow. This was the straight 4 consecutive hit «Vertical Square»

"GUAA...!!"

With a cry, the Gnome's body was blown several meters away and landed on the ground. The HP bar immediately dropped into the red zone. He must have realized this as his eyes that were glancing at the upper right corner seemed to bulge out from their sockets.

As his eyes went back to Yuuki, the expression on his face went from shock to anger.

"Tha...That's despicable, attacking like that all of a sudden...!"

As the leader started to yell back in a seemingly random manner, about 20 of his allies finally managed to recover and got into battle mode. The players that were in charge of the frontlines scattered and drew their weapons.

Asuna instinctively drew her World Tree wand and repeated what Yuuki said inside her mind.

—Asuna, some things have to be done through forceful means for the other party to understand.

This definitely wasn't something thought up randomly at the last moment, but a belief this mysterious girl called Yuuki had. That's because she always followed this example. She would challenge countless opponents on the streets in duels and use this to interact with them.

...I see...you're kind of right in that sense...

As Asuna wordlessly muttered, her face subconsciously showed a smile. If she continued to back away because she was scared of fighting against other people or revenge, the meaning of playing VRMMO will be lost. The sword at her waist wasn't a mere ornament, and it definitely wasn't some heavy burden.

Asuna took a step forward with determination and arrived beside Yuuki. Jun and Shiune were standing beside Asuna, and Thatch, Nori and Taruken were standing beside Yuuki.

Perhaps the enemy that outnumbered this group of 7, three to one, seemed to realize something as they couldn't help but back away.

Then, what broke this tense atmosphere—

Wasn't the enemy in front, but the numerous footsteps that came all the way here. The Gnome warrior looked over behind Asuna and company and showed a smile of victory.

"...!"

Asuna gasped and thought Why at such an inopportune time? and turned her head around. Numerous colored **cassocks** then appeared in front of them. Most of the guild emblems shown were a «Sagittarius», but some of them were the emblems of a «Shield and Horse». In other words, the people that came were the other half of the alliance the Gnome was waiting for, and there should be about 30 of them.

Even if Yuuki was that powerful, it's hard to win when being pinned down by an enemy that's 7 times their size on both front and back. The spells and arrows that can be fired from behind would be enough to wear their HP down to nothing.

—All because of my hesitation...

Asuna felt regret as she bit her lips tight. If she had followed Yuuki's belief right from the beginning, they could have at least broken through the 20 people in front of them and entered the boss room.

Just as Asuna was about to open her mouth and apologize, Yuuki, who was on her left, tapped her hand. The Imp girl's emotions were passed through the skin in the virtual world.

—Sorry, Asuna. My impatience dragged you down. But I don't regret doing this. Ever since we met, I've never seen you show such a beautiful smile.

Asuna held Yuuki's hand and answered this whisper that seemed to appear in her mind.

—I should be the one apologizing for not being able to help out. We might not be able to do it on this level, but we'll definitely beat the next level's boss.

Shiune and company seemed to feel the duo's interactions as they all nodded, formed a circle and faced the enemies on both sides. The 30 people that came rushing in front behind seemed to have understood the current situation as everyone drew their weapons.

Right now, they could only fight until the end. Asuna made her decision and raised her shortwand to chant the offensive spell. On seeing her

actions, the Cait Sith claw warrior revealed his carnivorous nature and yelled,

"STILL STRUGGLING TILL THE END..."

—But just when he was about to declare victory.

Something that was far beyond Asuna and all the players' expectations happened.

"That...That is...?"

The one who first noticed the anomaly was Nori, who had the nightvision ability. A second later, Asuna witnessed the phenomenon too.

At this moment, the enemy forces were already 20m in front of them, however, behind them, on the gradually curved wall of the corridor, there was a kind of...or rather, a certain person was dashing over here. As it was really too fast, only a black shadow could be seen.

That's the «Wall Run» that all lightweight elves could use. The only ones who could use them were Sylphs, Undines, Cait Siths, Imps and Spriggans. Normally, 10m would be the limit, but the shadow in front of them ran for about 30m. This highly difficult action can only be done through an exaggerated sprinting speed.

The moment she realized this, or rather, the moment she saw that vague figure, Asuna knew who that intruder was.

The profile ran at a really fast speed, dashed on the wall, past the reinforcements, and easily landed on the ground. His speed slowed down with the large amount of sparks caused by the sparks on the soles rubbing against the ground. He arrived in between the main forces and Asuna's company and stopped while facing Asuna's group.

That person was wearing tight-fitting black leather pants and a black longcoat, had short black hair that was bucked aside, and had a slightly large one-handed sword on his back.

Also, the black leather scabbard had a pure white wyvern emblem on it. That was the trademark of the «Lisbeth Weapons shop» that was opened at the streets of the world tree city. The sword was forged from a rare metal from Jötunheimr; it was a masterpiece from a close friend of Asuna.

The right hand of the black-clothed swordsman quickly reached for the light blue blade from behind, and then *Clang!* stabbed it into the stone floor beside him. The 30 veteran explorers all stopped like they were shocked by his presence.

Then, the words this uninvited guest said actually echoed what the Gnome said to Asuna.

"Sorry, this place is currently sealed off."

This voice was rather clear even though there was no feeling of deposition, and caused the group of 30 that just appeared, the 20 people behind Asuna, and the Sleeping Knights to be completely speechless.



The first one who responded at this defiant attitude was a skinny Salamander that was standing at the front of the reinforcements. He shook his dark red hair and gave a look of disbelief and said,

"Oi oi, «Blackie». Even you can't stop so many of us here, right?"

This swordsman who was called lots of nicknames because of his black attire shrugged and answered,

"Really? Why don't we try it?"

This thick-skinned attitude caused the Salamander, who seemed to be the leader of the guild alliance, smile wryly and raise his right hand.

"That's true. Then, try it...mages, roast him."

BACHK! Once he said that, this person snapped his fingers, and the back of the group immediately chanted their spell words quickly. Whether it was the response or the voices, one could tell that they were highly trained. Asuna wanted to chant a healing spell, but the 20 advance troops that were closing in from behind wouldn't allow her to do so.

At this moment, the Spriggan that entered tilted his head slightly.

Ever since both of them knew each other, and even when the avatars were different, Asuna saw that confident smile on his left cheek countless times. The next moment, the glow of the spells shot out behind that human wall and immediately covered a black shadow over that smile.

The «Black Swordsman» Kirito saw the seven high-level attack spells that were shot at him and didn't react at all. No, it was too late for him to react. All the spells were of the «Single Homing» type, and there's no way to dodge these attacks through movement in this 5m wide corridor where he couldn't fly.

Kirito drew the longsword and rested it on his right shoulder. At this moment, the blade let out a dark red light effect. It was a sword skill—

The next moment, all sorts of colored lights, explosions and the shocked expressions of more than 50 people filled the entire narrow hall.

Kirito used the 7 consecutive hit skill «Deadly Sins» to take on all the attack spells that came over... or rather, 'sliced' them up.

"No...No way..."

Even the «Absolute Sword» Yuuki could only mutter in disbelief. Asuna could understand her feelings, but if she herself was shocked by this level of exaggeration, reckless and radical actions, she couldn't be a friend of this VRMMO player called Kirito.

This was Kirito's own skill that was created outside the system, called «Spell Blast».

Kirito's specialty in old Aincrad was to use the sword skills to attack the weak points of the enemy's weapons instead of attacking the enemy, the outside system skill called «Arms Blast». Though that amazing skill itself required superhuman reflexes and extremely intricate aiming skills, it was harder to slice spells here in ALO.

As attack spells themselves aren't solid physical objects, and they look like a mass of light effects, the 'hit designation' can only be created when hitting the center of the spells. Also, the center of the spell must not be hit by an ordinary attack, but by a sword skill that hits it at the point at high speeds. That's because the solid nature of a normal weapon couldn't negate magic. In contrast, a sword skill would have some form of elemental damage like earth, water, fire, wind, light and darkness. However, it was already beyond insane to try to capture the center of the spell when using a sword swing that couldn't be controlled due to system assistance, and almost impossible.

In fact, Lyfa, Klein and Asuna themselves once tried to learn this «Spell Blast» skill with Kirito, and had to give up after 3 days. Even Kirito himself noted that he gained experience from 'Using a sword to slice bullets' in the other world called «Gun Gale Online» when he transferred there. On hearing Kirito say with a straight face 'No high speed spell will ever be faster than a rifle bullet', even Asuna, who was already at the level of being unsurprised by just about anything, could only stand there in shock.

Because of this reason, one could tell that Kirito was likely, no, definitely the only person who could use the «Spell Blast» skill in Alfheim. And he secretly trained this himself, and never used this in a duel or a group hunt, so now it should be the first time a large guild saw this for once.

"...What in the world..."

The long-haired Salamander muttered out, and from behind, they could hear voices 'He sliced magic!' 'That's not a coincidence, right?' 'That's why I said...' and all sorts of voices.

However, the other party was a guild that specializes in taking down the boss and reacted. Under the Salamander's orders, the frontline fighters drew their weapons, the rangers showed their lances and arrows, and the backup started chanting again. This time, it didn't look to be a «single homing» type, but also seemed to include «multi-homing» types and «Area ballistic» types.

Kirito again turned around, nodded quickly at Asuna, and pointed 3 fingers with his left hand.

Of course, this wasn't a victory sign to change the situation, but one with the meaning 'I'll help you stall them for 3 minutes'. Of course, he didn't think that he could beat 30 enemies alone.

At this moment, Asuna finally understood the reason why Kirito appeared here.

Once he heard Asuna say that she wanted to help the Sleeping Knights conquer this level, he knew that the gang would be obstructed by a large guild. Kirito was most likely lurking in the entrance area of the dungeon, and noticed the guild alliance's movements. Once he saw that Asuna and company couldn't fight off against such numbers, he intended to sacrifice himself to buy time as he caught up.

3 minutes. 180 seconds. It would be a twinkle of an eye in the house of forests, but it would be a long time in a fight against players. Asuna didn't doubt Kirito's ability, but could he really hang on for 3 minutes against so many people? Would it be wise to send someone to escort Kirito from the gang of 7 here...?

Just when Asuna was hesitating about this, two things interrupted her thoughts.

First, Kirito put his left hand behind his back and grabbed onto the hilt of the second sword he materialized, and drew it with a clear sound. That was a glamorous looking golden longsword. It wasn't made by a swordsmith, but a legendary weapon sealed in the deepest parts of the underground water Jötunheimr, the «Holy Sword Excaliber». In order to get this sword, the gang got Lyfa's friend, the flying-type evil-god «Tonkii» to reach the limit of the party and challenge it. They had to face near complete annihilation in the boss battles. However, the back of Kirito's profile as he went back to using two swords became ever so reliable, and Asuna felt that the hard work back then was worth it.

The pressure released by the golden longsword called the backup to slowly back away. As if taking advantage of the moment the enemy wavered, a roar suddenly echoed right from the back of the group.

"UWOOOOAAAAAAHHH!!! I'M HERE TOO, EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN'T SEE ME!!!"

That somewhat crude and hoarse voice was undoubtedly from that familiar katana user Klein. Asuna couldn't help but tiptoe to look behind, and could barely see that straight flowing red hair that was tied with a bandana. It seemed that Kirito wasn't the only one who came to inspect the dungeon. But why did he appear after some time?

"TOO SLOW. WHAT IN THE WORLD WERE YOU DOING!?"

On the human wall side, Kirito shouted out, and on the opposite end, Klein yelled back,

"SORRY, I GOT LOST!!!"

Asuna nearly fell down, but steadied herself, and noticed that little figure that was waving over from Kirito's shoulder. It was the navigation pixie Yui, who was also their 'daughter'. Her cute smile showed a ray of warmth into Asuna's heart.

--Thank you Yui-chan, thank you, Klein.

--I love you the most, Kirito-kun.

After muttering this deep inside her heart, Asuna immediately whispered to Yuuki beside her.

"We should be alright if we leave this to them. Just focus on breaking through the 20 people in front of us and head into the boss room."

"Okay, got it." Yuuki blinked a few times, and then answered with a clear voice.

She turned around, looking like she was going to activate her sword skill and raised the sword above her head. Jun and Shiune on her right and Thatch, Nori and Taruken on her left noticed the purple light effect and got into battle positions.

The 20 member advance party that hadn't grasped the situation completely and the Gnome warrior who was the leader noticed Asuna's company actions and got ready to fight back.

As the sound of magic and sword skills clashing resounded behind, Asuna yelled,

"...LET'S GO!"

With Yuuki leading, the 7 of them got into a wedge formation and rushed out. The Gnome and his followers roared and charged over.

The moment both sides clashed, *GAGAANN!!* The sound of impact exploded, and several light effects appeared at the same time. A chaotic battle royale began, and every corner of the corridor was filled with the sound of blades clashing against each other.

Asuna had personally experienced Yuuki's skills by dueling her, and at this point, she could tell that the other members were comparable. Even when fighting players, rather than the usual monsters, they were able to swing their weapons and fight.

Jun's two-handed sword and Thatch's heavy mace were both able to use their weights to break the enemy down from the front. Taruken's long spear and Nori's quarterstaff would attack during the opening. Yuuki herself used her superb dodging ability to easily dodge past several blades that were closing in on her and rush into the enemy's clutches, using devastating slashes to attack.

When facing the enemy that outnumbered them, the members of the Sleeping Knights could be said to be fighting valiantly. However, the enemy group wouldn't break like that — that's because the mages behind continued to chant healing spells.

In this huge battle, there would be some unexpected damage. Other than Yuuki, the other members' HP were starting to decrease. Asuna and Shiune started to chant their healing spells.

At this moment, 2 shadows from the enemies came rushing over them. They were assassin-type players with sharp daggers and wearing light leather armor.

Asuna noticed that these were the Sylphs that were hidden in front of the boss room several minutes ago, and instinctively changed her spell. She

used her specialty speed chant to finish reciting in 2 seconds. The two Sylphs had light streams of water appearing at their feet, and their feet that were bound caused them to fall.

Using this opening, Asuna whispered to Shiune, who finished casting the healing spell.

"Can you take care of the healing on your own?"

The Undine who was slightly taller than Asuna immediately nodded her head.

"Yeah, I should just be able to do it."

"I'll deal with the enemy healers then."

It's been a few minutes since the battle started, and the sounds from behind started to become more and more intense. This should be the result of Kirito and Klein charging into the enemy's group to prevent magic attacks. However, they didn't have any healers, and couldn't heal all sorts of unexpected damage. Kirito said that he could hang on for 3 minutes, but it would be best if they could break through the enemy within 2 minutes to repay their sacrifice. It would be best to end this battle quick.

Asuna quickly called her window, put the wand into her item inventory and switched to the rapier she loved to use. At once, a silver glow appeared at her waist, materializing a sword belt knitted from mithril thread, and a scabbard of the same material.

SHCHANK! The long, thin blade was drawn out. First, she ran over to the 2 Sylphs that were held up by the restraining spell «Aqua Bind», and mercilessly attacked their vital points to cause their HP bar to vanish immediately.

She peeked through the remnants of the avatars that shattered in front of her and looked over at where the battle was proceeding. It seemed that every corner of the corridor was filled with players maniacally swinging the blades in their hands, but if she had to put it, the right side was the one with less people.

Asuna took a deep breath, adjusted her breathing, and forcefully kicked the ground. She put the rapier in her right hand at her waist and sprinted. Once she reached a certain speed, she shouted at Yuuki, who was fighting with her back facing Asuna,

"YUUKI! DODGE!"

"He...!?—AA!?"

Yuuki tilted her head slightly, checked that Asuna was rushing over, and hurriedly dodged. Asuna aimed at the Gnome leader, standing still with his axe out, and thrust a sword strike out in a straight manner right as she got into a forward-bent posture.

BAA!! The sword let out some white flashes, and several lights surrounded Asuna. Asuna immediately felt a floating sensation, and she grew a long tail like a comet before rushing forward with tremendous speed.

"UWAAAHHH!!!"

The Gnome that was finally able to move readied the two-handed axe and was ready to use it as a shield. However, Asuna was faster, and the front tip of the rapier touched his body.

The Gnome looked like a monster that lost control as he was blown up into the air. He was about to have his HP whittled down to zero thanks to Yuuki, and was blown into yellow lights and scattered while in the air.

Having turned into a white comet, Asuna didn't slow down even after dealing with one person as she rushed over to the healers. The 3-4 people that were in the way and their leaders were blown aside. Some flew into the air, and some sat on the ground. She was using the strongest long distance thrust sword skill for rapiers, the «Flashing Penetrator». A lot of running was required to use this skill, so almost no one would use this in a 1 v 1 duel. However, it was very effective when breaking through people.

Asuna immediately pierced through the metal wall of armor and shields before gliding forward for about several meters. At this moment, she finally landed on the ground of the dungeon. She used the heel of her boots as brakes, creating lots of sparks in the process, and knelt on the ground on one leg before lifting her head. The four casters, wearing robes and cassocks, could only look down blankly at Asuna.

—It looked like the infamous nickname «Berserk Healer» became even better known now.

Asuna thought as she forcefully dragged the rapier in her right hand back.

The most important thing in a group battle wasn't the ability of the members fighting at the frontlines, but the status of the backup group supporting them from behind, Asuna fervently eliminated the opposing healers, and the frontlines were crushed by Yuuki, who had Shiune and the rest helping.

The total time taken was 2 minutes and 8 seconds.

Looking back, she immediately saw that Kirito and Klein were still fighting intently against the reinforcements. The enemy had already lost a lot of members, but the duo's HP bars were near the red region as shown by the cursor colors.

Deep within her heart, Asuna again thanked the two of them and Yui, who was on Kirito's shoulder acting as the tactical radar.

She immediately turned around and shouted at all of the Sleeping Knights, who managed to survive,

"ALRIGHT, IT'S THE MAIN SHOW NOW! LET'S GO BEAT THE BOSS!!"

The six of them immediately shouted alright and kicked the ground to dash towards the black gate leading to the boss room with Asuna.

Like their first challenge, Jun placed his left hand on the gates. The gates let out a heavy sound and opened both doors, shooting out 2 rows of bluish-white flames.

The time taken for the flames to form a circle would be the time taken for the gate to remain open for those still outside, but there was no need to wait. The seven of them immediately flew in. Asuna was the last one to rush in, and immediately turned around to press the stone button that was set on the right wall. This was the button to cancel the one minute waiting time.

The door let out a loud boom, and slowly closed on both left and right sides, and the intense battle behind was reaching its critical moment.

The black-clothed swordsman whose HP bar became bright red raised his right hand. He then pointed two fingers, this time really showing the V-sign to Asuna.

Once the boss room gate closes completely, they wouldn't be able to hear any voices from the corridor. Nobody will then be able to open this gate unless the fight inside ends.

In complete silence, fire would continue to rise every two seconds. Right now, the fire filled half the room. In other words, there were about 50 seconds before the boss appears.

"Everyone, hurry up and use potions to recover HP and MP. We'll proceed with the conquest as according to the plan in the meeting. The attack pattern at first will be simple. Just dodge them calmly."

After hearing Asuna's words, the six of them nodded slightly and started taking out red or blue bottles.

Asuna noticed that they still had something to say after drinking their potions, and showed a puzzled look. Yuuki then stepped forward to represent them and spoke,

"Asuna...those two came to help us and..."

"...Yeah."

Asuna smiled and nodded. Right now, Kirito and Klein should have their HP worn out and becoming little «Remain Lights». No, even if they remained there, nobody would revive them, so they should return to the respawn point.

Thinking that Yuuki and the rest would be worried about the duo that became sacrifices, Asuna continued to stare at everyone and said in a clear voice,

"Let's beat the boss to repay their intentions."

"But...we're always relying on you and your friends..."

Yuuki bit her lips, and the hair that had a red headband on it drooped down as well. However, Asuna merely patted Yuuki's shoulders. There were still 10 seconds until the boss appears. The Undine used this moment to say something important.

"You taught me something important too, Yuuki. Didn't you say that «Some things have to be done through forceful means for the other party to understand»?"

Yuuki's eyes widened, but Shiune and the other five immediately understood what Asuna was trying to say. As the fairies smiled and nodded, the last of the flames shot out to the sky behind them.

"Now, this is the last time! The guild just now will definitely try to regroup while we're battling and gather at the corridor. We have to work hard and show them the victory sign when the door opens!"

As the sub-leader of the «Knights of the Blood», she would also encourage everyone before a boss fight. However, the words Asuna said back then would only cause her allies to tense up. Those were words that would make them grip their swords hard, but wouldn't allow them to resonate with their hearts. That's because Asuna only thought of how to effectively command people, and never show their real feelings.

...Yuuki, once this battle is over, tell me more about you, like what journeys you went throughout the world and what adventures you had.

With such feelings, Asuna forcefully grabbed Yuuki's shoulder guards and stepped back. At this moment, she sheathed her rapier again and raised the World Tree wand up high.

In front of them, a deep bellowing began along with the formation of a rock-like polygon. The boss was about to appear. The four-armed giant leaped out as the humanoid-looking blocks were blown aside.

"Alright...let's challenge it again!"

On hearing Yuuki's heroic voice, everyone's increasing momentum matched the black giant's roars.

Chapter 7

Asuna used her thumb to flick open the cap of a small bottle and gulped down the blue liquid inside. She then checked the remaining amount of mana potions.

The potions that filled her pockets were used up during the 40 minute long intense battle, and she was left with three. Shiune, who was also acting as the healer alongside her, should have about the same amount as Asuna.

The few people who were in charge of the frontal assault seemed to be worn out. They tried their best to avoid the dodgeable attacks of the black giant's attack patterns, but they couldn't avoid the giant's toxic wide-ranged breath and the all-directional attack of the two metal chains swinging about crazily. While these attacks appeared, Asuna and Shiune could only continue to chant the highest level spells for healing, so their mana points continued to dwindle like flowing water.

Even though Nori's stick, Taruken's spear and Yuuki's sword managed to hit the giant precisely, it felt like they were hitting an iron wall that wouldn't be damaged no matter how much they attacked. The boss would occasionally put its four arms in front of its body to defend itself, and when it did so, it would be able to deflect everything like metal, and the sense of futility continued to increase.

Asuna swallowed the anxiety that was rising up her throat along with the potion, and energetically said to everyone,

"Everyone, we're going to make it! Just a little more!"

—Even so, 5 minutes ago, she was shouting the same words. As there weren't any HP bars shown on the boss monsters of the floors in New Aincrad, they could only guess its HP through movements. The black giant that was slow and dormant at first could be said to have gone completely berserk. They could confirm that he didn't have much health left, but this of course was merely an overly optimistic guess.

In such an overly long battle where there was no end in sight, the backup players behind normally needed to use up mana points, but the front players withstanding the enemy's onslaught had to use their mental strength and concentration. In a normal boss battle, they would have to switch a tank at the front after a maximum of 5 minutes. From this, one could tell how much the Sleeping Knights were struggling.

However, they would still end up tired in the end. After hearing Asuna's call, Yuuki was the only one who let out an energetic Oh!! to answer her. The petite Imp girl didn't show any fatigue even after countless minutes of battle as she continued to use her fleet feet to dodge the giant's hammer and chains before using the sword in her right hand to deal decisive damage.

Before this, Asuna thought that Yuuki's strength came from her abnormal reflexes, but now she had a whole new understanding to this. That strong will to concentrate and continue swinging the sword may even be a match for Kirito's.

At this moment, Asuna chanted for the umpteenth time as she saw a distant memory in the past from the current scene.

In the 74th level boss room in Old Aincrad, Kirito once fought valiantly alone against a gigantic humanoid-type monster. He used parries and speedy footwork to dodge the enemy's ferocious attacks under such a dangerous situation, and his two swords continued to swing at a machine gun-like speed, using endless number of sword skills at the weakness of the boss, the flank—

"Ah.."

With this sudden idea, Asuna couldn't help but call out. The spell chanting failed as it was interrupted, and BOON! Black smoke appeared around her.

Asuna immediately cringed as she messed up, but Shiune, who was behind her, managed to finish her spell at the last second. Tecchi and company that was surrounded by toxic breath in front had their HP bars reverted to a safe level.

Asuna raised her hand in apology to Shiune, who glanced at her, then said quickly,

"Shiune, I have an idea. Can you hang on for about 30 seconds by yourself?"

"Un, it's alright. I still have enough mana."

Asuna raised her hand at Shiune again, who nodded, then raised the staff in her right hand. She quickly took a deep breath, and started chanting a new spell at the fastest speed possible.

As the spell words were chanted, glittering ice pieces started to appear in front of Asuna, and they immediately solidified into four sharp ice pillars. Once the ice knives were complete, a blue circle appeared in the girl's eyes. This was the scope of the non-tracking offensive spell.

Asuna cautiously moved her left hand and slightly adjusted the blue scopes at the throats below the two heads of the giant. The giant continued to move forward, and the hammers in the upper two hands were ready to swing down—

"Eii!"

Asuna swung the staff in her right hand straight down. 4 ice pillars flew in the air with a light blue trail, accurately hitting the bottom of the giant's necks.

"GUUOOOOOHHHHHH!!!"

The giant immediately let out what sounded like a cry of agony as the hammer attack stopped. The four arms were crossed in front of its body as it curled up. It kept such a defensive position for about five seconds before raising its arms again and slamming the warhammer into the stone floor.

The ground trembled with this heavy and loud sound, and Asuna steadied herself to prevent herself from falling as she whispered,

"As expected..."

Seeing that Shiune, beside her, had her head tilted in doubt, Asuna quickly explained,

"I originally thought that the defensive action was just random, but it wasn't like that. His neck is the weakness. We didn't have too much strength to look for its weakness, so I completely forgot about this..."

"So we can beat it by attacking that, right?"

"I guess...it would be more efficient, but that weakness is way too high..."

The giant was about 4m, and even Taruken's spear would need some more length before reaching its neck. It couldn't be attacked directly. They could fly and attack if it was on the field, but they couldn't do so in a dungeon.

"Looks like we can only get ready to be countered and use our sword skills to attack."

Asuna nodded her head in agreement with Shiune. They could only use a thrust-type sword skill if they wanted to extend their hangtime in the air in an area they couldn't fly, or jump and use a combo-type skill. Of course, once they finished doing so, there would be a lag, and then they would fall without any defense. The enemy would use that time to counter hard. Even though they could try to use a spell to revive anyone if they died, it wouldn't work every time. Also, revival spells were rather long, and would slow down the recovery of health, which may cause the entire party to collapse.

However—Yuuki would definitely say without hesitation, let's try this. Asuna thought about this and looked at Shiune's face. In the end, this tender-looking yet unexpectedly strong Undine nodded hard to agree with Asuna's thoughts.

"I'll go forward to tell them the battle plan. Please hang on and heal them."

"Leave it to me!"

Of the few potions that she had left, Asuna grabbed two bottles, handed them to Shiune, and immediately dashed forward. She immediately ran through 15m, got near the black giant, and the roar of the chain immediately came from beside her. She cringed her neck back to dodge it, but the plumb-bob^[3] grazed the front end of her shoulder, and her HP immediately dropped.

However, Asuna didn't mind at all. As she got behind Yuuki, she shouted,

"Yuuki!"

Yuuki, who was swinging her sword, looked back and widened her eyes,

"Asuna, why are you here?"

"Listen to me. This guy has a weakness. We should be able to deal more damage to it if we aim for the central parts of its neck."

"Weakness?"

Yuuki looked back again, and stared at the giant's head, up above. At this moment, a large barrel-sized hammer suddenly flew down from above, and both of them immediately ducked. Yuuki then jumped to avoid the shockwave on the ground and shouted,

"It's too high...I can't reach it even if I jumped!"

"Isn't there a well-suited stepping board?"

Asuna smiled and looked over at Tecchi who was slightly further away, raising the shield that looked like a doorplate and protecting Nori from the wildly swinging chain. Yuuki seemed to understand Asuna's intention and smiled back.

Both of them dashed forward and went about 3m behind Tecchi. Yuuki put her left hand near her mouth and let out an amazingly loud voice from her petite body.

"Tecchi! DUCK DOWN AFTER THE NEXT HAMMER ATTACK!!"

The tall and large gnome widened his small eyes, but immediately nodded.

The black giant swung its metal chain for a while, and then tilted its upper body that was as large as a large boulder before taking a deep breath. It paused for a while before opening its two mouths. KOHAAA!! It let out its toxic breath, and the surroundings were all covered with a sulfur-like smell. Everyone who was standing in front of it had their HP drop bit by bit.

However, once the breath attack ended, a blue light descended and recovered everyone's health with perfect timing. The giant then raised the two hammers that were in its upper arms.

Yuuki ducked and got ready to charge forward. Asuna quickly said to her little back.

"That's the last chance! Do your best, Yuuki!"

Yuuki kept her back facing Asuna and immediately answered,

"Leave it to me, Nee-chan!!"

Nee...chan?

As Asuna blinked after hearing such unexpected words, the girl leapt forward.

The giant in front looked like it was going to slice through the ground as it slammed its two hammers down into the ground hard. The deep sound echoed throughout the room, and Tecchi immediately ducked to defend against the radial shockwave.

Yuuki then jumped, using her left foot to step on Tecchi's left shoulder, and her right foot stepped on his thick and heavy helmet—

"URRIIIYAAAAA!!!"

With a sharp cry, Yuuki seemed to be moving the wings that didn't exist as she leapt high. She got close to the giant's chest in an instant and pulled the sword in her right hand back hard.

"YAAA!!!"

Yuuki shouted out again and charged at the joint of the two necks at an alarming rate. Immediately, the bluish-purple flash effect exploded, causing the coin-shaped room to be filled with light.

Even if it's an area where they couldn't fly in, the players just needed to continue using sword skills in the air to remain there before the skill ends. Right now, Yuuki was in front of the black giant, moving her right hand at a lightning like speed, letting out 5 strikes from right up to bottom left, and then made another five hits in a line to form an intersection point.

Whenever the sharp tip of the blade hit its weakness, the four arms of the giant would continue to struggle and let out what sound like a wail.

The thrust attacks on the monster created an X shape. Yuuki's body tilted to the right and put her left hand on the right hand that was holding the sword.

The dazzling flashes released by the blade caused Asuna to narrow her eyes. At this moment, Yuuki's obsidian sword looked like a diamond. The shining white sword seemed to let out a crisp sound like a bell and hit straight into the intersection of the X point, the point where the giant's necks were connected, and then stabbed it straight into the giant's body.

Soon after, the black glowing skin of the giant started to form several cracks, with the point the sword was stabbed in being the center. The cracks seemed unable to take the pressure that was coming from inside and continued to become thicker. The cracks then extended to the giant's body and limbs.



With the sound of a large tree falling, the giant's body was split into half from the point the two heads were joined. The 4m tall giant corpse then looked like a shattered glass statue as it exploded into numerous fragments of various sizes. The pure white light that was given off from the insides of the body started to close in with the physical impact, and Asuna's head started to throb hard. The sound effects that had deep and high-frequency sounds mixed in bounced through the dome, finally dragging on into a long and stiff metallic sound before vanishing.

The mysterious blue flame that lit the dim coin-shaped dome suddenly shook and became a normal orange. The boss room was filled with bright light, chasing the remaining amount of devilish intent away.

GACHANG. A loud sound rang. The door deep inside that led to the next room was unlocked.

".....Haha...we...we made it..."

Asuna let out a hoarse laugh as she collapsed onto the ground. As she looked up, she exchanged looks with Yuuki, who was blankly staring at where the boss was destroyed.

The petite Imp blinked for another few seconds, and then finally gave a smirk. However, it immediately changed into a smile she had seen many times before—no, it should be said to be the most dazzling smile.

Yuuki sheathed her sword and immediately ran over to Asuna. She immediately jumped over with her arms wide open from afar and leapt into Asuna's arm.

"GUAA!?"

Asuna let out a loud cry and collapsed with Yuuki onto the ground. Both of them stared at each other's eyes at a close distance to each other, and started shouting,

"AHAHAHA...WE DID IT, WE WON...WE WON, ASUNA!"

"UN, YEAH! AHHH—...HOW TIRING—!!"

Even with Yuuki sitting on her, Asuna still stretched her limbs out and laid down flat on the ground. The 5 other partners around her who were also so tired that they collapsed leapt up, gave victory signs and started cheering.

At this moment, Asuna noticed a heavy sound from above and looked over at the source of the sound. The entrance that appeared in her inversed vision started to open aside again, and numerous people were gathered there.

The ones who rushed in without waiting for the doors to open completely and made such a loud ruckus was obviously the large guild alliance party who blocked the corridor. These people noticed that the boss room was filled with orange light, and curbed their momentum as they slowed their footsteps before stopping to look around.

A dark red haired Salamander was standing in front of the large party of about 50 people. At this moment, his eyes seemed to meet Asuna's. The leader's face seemed to show amazement, understanding and regret, and Asuna merely watched this in a really happy mood.

"Hehe..."

Asuna, who was lying on the floor, laughed, and then showed a victory sign to Yuuki and her 5 partners.

The members of the large guild left some common menacing words before leaving, and Asuna and the Sleeping Knights opened the door deep inside the room. They climbed up the long spiral staircase and came out from a pavilion shaped building. They arrived at the 28th level where no one had entered previously. They immediately ran over to the nearest shopping street, and the moment Yuuki activated the transfer gate at the central plaza, the boss conquest quest was completed.

The seven of them immediately used the gate that was giving off a blue light to return to the streets of Ronbaru, formed a circle at a corner of the plaza, and again hi-touched^[4] each other.

"Everyone worked hard! It's finally over!"

Asuna smiled as she said that, but she felt a little lonely inside her heart. She was just a mercenary after all, and the end of this contract would mean that they would have to go their separate ways.

No. There was still a lot of time to be friends with them —as Asuna thought about that, Shiune suddenly pat her on the shoulder. That nice looking face showed a serious expression that was different from usual.

"No, Asuna-san. It's still not over yet."

"...Eh?"

"There's still one more thing to do."

After looking at her expression, Asuna immediately thought of the incident at the «Monument of Swordsmen» in Black Iron Palace. Speaking of which, the members of the Sleeping Knights' aim wasn't to conquer the bosses, but to leave the names of all the members on the monument as proof that the guild existed. Speaking of which, it would be too early for her to be happy now—

However, what Shiune said next was far beyond what Asuna expected.

"—Let's have a party to celebrate."

Asuna's knees went limp as she nearly fell. She raised her fist in protest, and then put her hands on her hips before saying,

"Un, okay! Let's have a big one!"

After saying that, Jun's face showed a smile,

"We still have lots of funds here! Which place are we going to choose? Should we rent some high-class restaurant in some city?"

"Ahh..."

Asuna suddenly had a thought. She then locked her fingers together and looked around. Even though she only knew them for a mere two days, she should be able to get along with these people like old friends. Asuna really believed in this as she said,

"Well...in that case...do you want to come over to my house? It's a little small though."

On hearing Asuna's invitation, Yuuki immediately showed a smile.

However, for some reason—her smile vanished like melting snow. Yuuki bit her lower lip and looked down.

"Yu...Yuuki, what is it?"

Even though she was feeling puzzled, Asuna still asked the normally enthusiastic girl who in turn didn't lift her head. At this moment, Shiune looked like she was going to finish off what Yuuki said as she continued,

"...Well...I'm really sorry, Asuna-san. Please don't mind us...it's just that we..."

However, before Shiune finished, Yuuki, who had her head lowered, suddenly gasped and grabbed Shiune's right hand.

She bit her lips hard, and her large eyes showed an earnest look as she silently looked at Shiune. Even though Yuuki looked like she was trying to say something as she moved her lips twice, she didn't let out a voice in the end.

However, Shiune seemed to understand what Yuuki wanted to say. Her lips showed a smile that was difficult to understand. She put her right hand on Yuuki's head, and then faced Asuna again.

"Thank you, Asuna-san. We'll gladly come over to your house then."

Asuna could only feel troubled as she didn't understand what was going on just now. However, Nori seemed like she wanted to dispel the gloomy atmosphere as she said with her usual forthright voice,

"If it's like that, we have to prepare the wine! Let's buy one whole barrel!"

"There's none of that potato sake you like, Nori."

Taruken interrupted at this moment and gave a stern comment from behind.

"Stop spouting nonsense. Since when did I like potato sake? I like Awamori sake the most!"

"Aren't you still like an old man."

Jun's stronger punchline caused everyone to start laughing. Asuna started joining in too, and then looked over at Yuuki. Though Yuuki's face showed a smile, a certain sense of reluctance in her seemed like it didn't vanish completely.

The gang went to the central marketplace of Ronbaru, bought a large amount of alcohol and food before moving to the 22nd level.

Most of them took off from the plaza in the town area, looking down at the forest that was buried by snow below as they moved south. They flew by the frozen lake, and could see a stretch of open land and a round house there.

"O, over there?"

Yuuki's excited voice caused Asuna to nod.

"Yeah..ah!"

Before Asuna could even finish, Yuuki opened her arms and immediately flew down to the courtyard in front of the house, landed with a huge 'BFUU' and whipped up a large amount of snow. A large number of birds that were perched on the trees nearby were all shocked.

"...Really."

Asuna and Shiune glanced at each other before smiling and opened their wings as they got ready to land. Asuna glided around for a while before landing in the courtyard, and was immediately dragged towards the door by Yuuki, who couldn't wait.

Asuna wanted to introduce her friends if they were around, but there wasn't anyone inside. Kirito and Klein, who helped to stop the large guild, haven't returned from the save point, so it couldn't be helped. However, even Lisbeth and Silica weren't around. Did everyone expect this to happen and deliberately moved aside for the 7 of them to party?

"Heh. Fuu-n, is this Asuna's house?"

Yuuki happily looked around at the tables that grew out from the floor, the heater that was burning red and the swords and other items that were hanging on the wall. The other six were all gathered around the table, taking out the food they bought out from their item inventory. Soon, obscure food, drinks and snacks were piled up like a hill.

They followed Nori's wishes and bought wine. They unplugged the corks to pour the golden liquid into the cups and lined them up. With that, the preparations for the party were complete. Jun dragged Yuuki, who was watching Asuna intently as she kept her collection of condiments, back to the living room, and the 7 of them sat down in front of the table.

Yuuki, who was in charge of leading the toast, smiled brightly and said,

"In celebration of our triumph in the boss conquest...cheers!"

Cheers! The other people chanted. After that, the sounds of glass cups knocking into each other could be heard as everyone immediately gulped down the wine and started their reckless party.

Jun and Tecchi talked about how they defeated the boss. Nori and Taruken were excitedly talking about all the wines in ALO, and Asuna, who was beside them, heard Yuuki and Shiune talk about the past VRMMOs they were in.

"And the worst thing is that it must be some sort of game called «Insect Site» in America!"

Yuuki used her arms to wrap around her body as her face tensed up.

"Ahh...about that."

Shiune also nodded her head helplessly.

"Heh...what kind of game is it?"

"Insects! They were all insects! It's fine if the monsters were all insects, but even the players were all insects~. I was an ant that could walk on two legs, so it was fine, but Shiune..."

"No, you can't say it!"

"She was one huge hornworm. She could let out thread from her moment..."

Yuuki finally couldn't help it as she started laughing at this point. After seeing Shiune smirk, Asuna started to laugh too.

"It's great~ we could go about travelling through all sorts of worlds with everyone."

"What about Asuna? Looks like you've played VRMMOs for a long time."

"Me? Errm, don't tell anyone. Actually, I spent a lot of time playing to get enough money to buy this house..."

"I see~"

Yuuki lifted her head, and again narrowed her eyes and looked at the living room.

"But this house is really comfortable. Sure has a memorable feeling to it..."

"Yeah. I feel safe staying here."

Shiune nodded deeply too.

However, her small lips suddenly opened.

"Wha, what's wrong with you, Shiune?"

"Damn it, I forgot about it! Speaking about money...we told Asuna that we would hand all the boss drops over to her when we asked her to defeat the boss. What should we do? We bought so much stuff..."

"Wah, I forgot about it!"

Both of them looked apologetic as they lowered their shoulders. On seeing this, Asuna smiled and waved her hand at them before saying,

"It's alright. I'll just take a little. Ah, I suppose—it's better..."

After saying this, she kept her mouth shut and sighed hard,

"Not take anything. However, I have something I want to ask you people."

"Eh...?"

"Well...even though the agreement is complete...but I still want to talk to Yuuki some more. I have a lot of things I want to ask you about."

Yuuki, I hope you can teach me—how to become as strong as you. Asuna thought deep inside and continued,

"Can you let me join the Sleeping Knights?"

Asuna had never joined any guilds ever since she became a spirit in ALO. Large guilds have invited her a few times before, and Kirito and Lisbeth said that they could form a small one, but nothing came of it.

The reason it became like that was mostly because Asuna still had some «fear» about guilds. In the past, she was the sub-leader of what was called the strongest guild for more than a year. At that time, she demanded iron-like discipline and steel-like will from her members, and she acted as an example and never showed a smile in front of them. The members back then only feared her, and never looked up to her. Asuna was scared that if she joined a guild in ALO, her mannerism in the past would return.

However, Asuna managed to blend in amongst the Sleeping Knights naturally, and could give them instructions without hesitation. That must have been because the earnest attitudes of Yuuki and the rest made Asuna get rid of the doubts inside her easily. Being with them would definitely make that wall in her heart shorter, and she could become really

strong. Asuna herself never noticed it, but Kirito, Lisbeth, Klein and everyone should have noticed this and supported her actions. Thus, when Asuna stated that she wanted to join in the conquest activity of another guild, they didn't feel unhappy, but continued to give Asuna encouragement.

On hearing Asuna's request, Yuuki didn't answer immediately as she bit her lips hard. Her wide eyes showed anxiety again.

Shiune and the other 4 quietened down and stared at Yuuki and Asuna. Amidst this silence, Yuuki merely stared at Asuna. Finally, the voice she let out was a trembling one that was different from usual.

"Well...Asuna. We...the Sleeping Knights will probably...disband in spring. After that, it's unlikely that everyone would be back here."

"Un, I know. It doesn't really matter until spring. I want to be friends with Yuuki...and everyone. It should be alright if it's before spring, right...?"

Asuna leaned forward and stared at Yuuki's purple eyes. However, Yuuki actually avoided Asuna's gaze for the first time. She gently shook her head and said,

"Sorry...I'm really sorry, Asuna. I'm really sorry...really..."

Yuuki continued to mutter, and yet it sounded really painful. Asuna didn't have the heart to let her continue.

"I see...it's alright. I should be the one sorry here for making things difficult for you, Yuuki."

"Well...Asuna-san, we...we..."

Beside her, Shiune looked like she wanted to help Yuuki to continue, but it was rare that even she didn't know what to say.

Asuna looked around at the pained expressions on everyone's faces, and clapped her hands to try and ease the mood as she said in an energetic voice,

"Sorry for troubling you after mentioning that. Let's go see that to change the mood!"

"That...?"

After hearing Asuna say that, Shiune merely felt troubled, and Yuuki lowered her head dejectedly. At this moment, Asuna pat both of them on the shoulder.

"You forgot about the most important thing! The «Monument of Swordsmen» at Black Iron Palace should be updated!"

"Ah, that's right!"

Jun shouted as he got up.

"Let's go, let's go! Let's go take a photo!"

"Shall we go?"

Once Asuna made that invitation, Yuuki finally smiled.

After dragging Yuuki, who still looked a little dejected, Asuna saw the center plaza of the «Starting City». Actually, she hadn't been here for a long time.

"It's really wide here...here, come over here, everyone!"

With their backs facing the large palace, they quickly moved through the garden, and the rectangular «Black Iron Palace» soon appeared in front of everyone. As it was the most famous landmark in Aincrad, a lot of new and old players would go in and out from this place.

After passing through the tall and large gate, they entered the building, and the cooling air immediately stroked everyone's skin. The players' socks stepped on the iron floor, and caused many echoes due to the abnormally high ceiling.

Asuna, Yuuki and the rest let out sharp footsteps as they entered the hall inside. They went through two doors, and right in front of them was a large space that was shrouded in a quiet atmosphere. In the middle, there was a long and large monument.

"Is that it?"

Jun and Nori ran past Asuna and Yuuki as they ran forward. After a few seconds, they arrived below the «Monument of Swordsmen». Asuna immediately lifted her head and looked at the end of the thick words.

"It...it's there."

Yuuki suddenly muttered, and the hand holding Asuna's hand exerted more force. At this moment, Asuna noticed that at the center of the black glowing monument, under the words [Braves of 27th Floor], their names were clearly indicated in English.

"It's there...our names..."

Yuuki suddenly muttered. Upon seeing her wet eyes, Asuna started to feel emotional too.

"Oi~ we're going to take a shot!"

Jun's voice could be heard from behind. Asuna grabbed Yuuki's shoulder and turned around.

"Here, smile, Yuuki."

Yuuki finally smiled the moment Asuna said that. The 6 of them were lined in front of the monument, and Jun operated the «Screen-Shot Camera Crystal» window. He set the time, let go of it, and the crystal floated in the air, showing the countdown as it flickered above.

Jun ran between Yuuki and Tecchi. As everyone showed their smiles, the crystal let out a 'passh' sound as it glowed.

"Okay!"

Jun returned to the crystal. Asuna and Yuuki looked back at the «Monument of Swordsmen» again.

"We did it, Yuuki."

Asuna let go of Yuuki's head and patted her on the head. Yuuki nodded her head slightly and stared at the 7 people's names for quite some time before quickly,

"Un...I, I finally did it, Nee-chan."

"Fufufu."

After hearing her say that, Asuna couldn't help but laugh out.

"Yuuki, you said that again."

"Eh...?"

Yuuki could only stare at Asuna's face as she didn't know why Asuna started laughing.

"You called me Nee-chan in the boss room as well. Of course I'm happy too...—!?"

Halfway through, Asuna took those words back after saying it.

That's because Yuuki had already widened her eyes as she used her hands to cover her mouth. Those purple eyes let out a transparent liquid, and finally rolled down her white face.

"Yuu...Yuuki...?"

Asuna gasped and reached out, wanting to grab the Imp girl. However, Yuuki took two, three steps back. She opened her mouth and said in a hoarse voice,

"Asuna...I, I..."

Yuuki suddenly lowered her head and wiped her teary face before waving her left hand. With trembling fingers, she pressed the window in front of her, and that petite body was immediately surrounded by white light—

From that day on, the invincible swordsman «Absolute Sword» Yuuki disappeared from Aincrad.

Chapter 8

Asuna turned her eyes to the paper in her hand, and checked that the handwritten name was the same as the one indicated horizontally on the wall of the large building.

Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture area. The building was located in a place surrounded by a lot of green hills. It didn't look like the metropolitan area here with the relatively short height, the design of the two wings, and the quietness of the surrounding hills. However, it really took Asuna less than 30 minutes from her house in Setagaya and down the East express line.

The building was new, bathed under the low sunlight of winter. The wall was dyed brown. It's really like the place I slept in for a long time, Asuna thought, as she put the note back into her pocket.

"Are you here, Yuuki...?"

She whispered. She wanted to meet her, but she felt that, on the other hand, it's best if the girl wasn't staying here.

After wandering around for a while, Asuna pulled the collar of her coat that was tightly clinging to her uniform, and hurried walked towards the main entrance.

It's been 3 days since «Absolute Sword» Yuuki disappeared from Aincrad.

At the final moment, she shed tears in front of that Monument of Swordsmen, and even till now, that image was etched in Asuna's eyes. She couldn't forget like that. No matter what, she wanted to see her again, to talk to her again. However, the messages she sent out were all replied with «the recipient's not logged in», and there wasn't any signs that they were read.

The members of the Sleeping Knights may know where Yuuki is, Asuna thought. However, two days ago, at the Lombard hotel where they would normally gather, Shiune was the only one who was there. She lowered her drooping eyelashes and shook her head.

"We couldn't contact Yuuki either. It's not just ALO. It seemed like she never FullDived again. And we don't know anything about her in the real world. And..."

Shiune paused at this moment, and stared at Asuna with a worried look.

"Asuna-san. I guess, Yuuki didn't want to meet you again. It's not about the others, but it's for your sake."

Asuna was so stunned that she couldn't say anything. After a few seconds, she finally managed to squeeze out a voice,

"Wh...why? No...I feel, Yuuki, Shiune, you guys, you don't have to break up your relationships with me. If I've been troubling you, I won't pursue this any further. But...I can't accept that if it's because of me."

"What about troubling us..."

Shiune, who had been keeping a calm expression, gave a rare pained expression as she shook her head hard,

"We were really happy to meet you. In this world, we were able to make such wonderful memories because of you, Asuna-san. Helping to defeat the boss, and even saying that you wanted to join the guild. We couldn't express our thanks enough no matter what. But...really, please, just forget about us."

Shiune paused at this moment, then moved her left hand to operate the window. A small trade window appeared in front of Asuna.

"It's earlier than expected, but I want to disband the Sleeping Knights here. The gifts to you are all here, Asuna-san, the items the boss dropped and our equipments..."

"No...there's no need. I can't accept this."

Asuna removed the window like she was shaking it off, and then walked over to Shiune.

"Are we really going to say goodbye here? I...I like, being with Yuuki, Shiune, everyone. I thought that we could still remain friends even if the guild disbands. But, am I the only one who thinks like this...?"

In the past, Asuna would never say such words. However, having spent many days with Yuuki and the rest, Asuna felt that she had changed somewhat. It's because of this that she didn't want to say farewell to everyone.

However, Shiune lowered her head, and merely shook it.

"Sorry...sorry, but this is for the best. It's better to separate here...sorry, Asuna-san."

Then, she clicked the button of the window as if she was trying to run away, and logged out.

It wasn't just Yuuki. Shiune, Jun, Nori and the other members never logged on to ALO after that.

Perhaps Asuna herself may be mistaken for thinking that a mere few days of interaction was enough to make them friends. However, the Sleeping Knights left a deep and indelible impression on her. She couldn't think about forgetting them at all.

The 3rd semester had already begun, but even though she managed to meet up with Kazuto, Rika and Keiko in the real world, Asuna's heart felt really heavy. On thinking about that, deep within Asuna's eyes and ears, Yuuki's smiling face would awaken in front of her. Nee-chan, that was what Yuuki called Asuna. Having realized this, she cried. No matter what, Asuna wanted to know that reason.

And yesterday, during lunch break, Asuna received a message from Kazuto saying, [meet you at the rooftop].

On the bare concrete rooftop that had cold wind bellowing through, Kazuto leaned on the thick pipe that was used for air circulation, waiting for Asuna.

It's been more than a year since they were released from SAO, but Kazuto in the real world didn't seem to gain any weight. His younger sister Suguha would tell him to eat more, so he shouldn't be worrying about his nutrition. Maybe the calories that were taken in were all used up by jogging and the sports gym, or maybe the intense battles in the virtual world would use up the calories in the real world.

The buttons of his blazer were undone, his hands were placed in his pockets, and the somewhat long fringe was blown by the wind. His outfit and height changed, but he still looked the same, like he was in old Aincrad. Asuna looked like she was attracted as she walked over to him, and leaned her forehead against Kazuto's shoulder as he looked up.

Asuna wanted to express all the intense emotions in her heart in one go, but she couldn't express them in words. She closed her eyes, endured the

sobbing feeling that was welling up in her throat, and felt the gentleness of Kazuto's hand patting her back. At the same time, a voice rang in her ears,

"Do you want to meet that «Absolute Sword» no matter what?"

These words probably encompassed all of Asuna's wishes. Yes, just once. That's because Asuna believed that Yuuki hoped for this as well.

"They told you it's better not to meet again, right? Even like this?"

Asuna told everything to Kazuto, about the 27th level boss conquest battle, the unexpected farewell after that, and Shiune's words when she last met her. This question was probably asked after he made a conclusion from those words. At this, Asuna nodded hard again.

"Un, even so, I want to. I want to meet her to talk to her again. I have to."

"Is that so?"

With that simple answer, Kazuto put his hand on Asuna's shoulder and nudged her slightly away, pulling out a piece of paper from the pocket of his blazer.

"Maybe you can meet her if you go there."

"Eh...?"

"It's just a possibility...but, I feel that «Absolute Sword» is there."

"How...How do you know this, Kirito-kun...?"

Asuna blankly asked as she received the piece of paper that was folded twice. Kazuto turned to look at the sky, and whispered,

"That's because that's the only clinical test area of the «Medicuboid»."

"Medi...Cuboid?"

As she repeated this inexplicable term she had never heard of before, Asuna opened the paper.

Written in small words on it was the name [Yokohama North General Hospital] and the address.

She went through the twin-layered automatic doors that were polished clean, went through the entrance hall that was brightly lit, and the whiff of a memorable disinfectant smell floated about.

There were mothers carrying children and old people in wheelchairs moving by. Asuna went by the silent area and headed for the reception counter.

She filled in her name and address in the form placed at her window, and stopped at the moment she was about to fill in the name of the person she wanted to visit. Asuna only knew about the name Yuuki, and she didn't know if it was the real name or not. From what she heard from Kazuto, even if she was here, it's hard to tell if she could check this or even meet her. But she couldn't just give up here after coming all the way. Asuna decided to take the form and handed it over to the window.

On the other side of the counter, the nurse in white uniform noticed Asuna approaching, and lifted her face.

"Are you going to meet someone?"

Asuna could only blankly nod her head as she faced this smile and question. She handed over the request form that was partly blank and said

"Errm...I want to meet her, but I don't know her name."

"Yes?"

As the nurse raised her eyebrows in surprise, Asuna desperately tried to find her choice of words.

"I think it's a girl about 15 years old. Her name may be «Yuuki», but I may be mistaken."

"There's a lot of patients here. It's hard for me to know when you say that."

"Errm...I want the person who's testing the «Medicuboid»."

"As for the patient's privacy..."

At this moment, a senior nurse inside the counter lifted her face and looked at Asuna. Then, she turned to the nurse who was talking to Asuna, seemingly whispering something.

The nurse before blinked about it and again looked up at Asuna. She used a thoroughly different voice, a delicate one.

"Excuse me, what is your name?"

"Ah, that, I'm Yuuki, Asuna."

Asuna answered and handed the form over. The nurse received the form, looked at it, and then handed it to the colleague inside.

"Can I check your identification?"

"Ok, okay."

Asuna hurriedly took her wallet out from the inside of her blazer and drew the identification card for her to see. The nurse cautiously compared the face on the photo and Asuna's face, nodded her head, told her to wait for a moment, and took the phone receiver beside her.

She used the internal line to call someone, whispered 2,3 words, and turned back to Asuna.

"Please look for Doctor Kurahashi of the 2nd medical department. Take the lift at the front side to the 4th level, head right, and show this to the reception counter."

Asuna received her student pass and a silver card from the tray that was handed out, and bowed.

After waiting for about 10 minutes on the bench at the reception area of the 4th level, Asuna noticed a white-cloaked figure walking over quickly.

"Yaa, excuse me, my apologies, sorry to keep you waiting."

Apologizing in a strange manner and nodding his head was a short and somewhat plump male doctor. He was probably in his early 30s, his shiny forehead was combed in a 3-7, and he had thick glasses on.

Asuna hurriedly stood up and bowed deeply,

"It, it's alright. I intruded suddenly on my part. Well, it's alright for me to wait."

"No no, I wasn't on duty in the afternoon, so it was perfect timing. Then, Yuuki Asuna-san, right?"

Smiling as he narrowed his slightly drooping eyes, the male doctor tilted his head slightly.

"Yes, I'm Yuuki."

"I'm called Kurahashi, the main doctor treating Konno-san. I didn't expect you to come and visit her here."

"Konno...san?"

"Ehh, her full name's Konno Yuuki, written as 'Cotton' and 'Season'. I've been calling her Yuuki-kun...she's been telling me all about you, Asuna-san. Ah, sorry, my bad. I blurted this out because of Yuuki-kun."

"It's alright, just call me Asuna."

Asuna smiled as she answered, and Doctor Kurahashi smiled back in an embarrassed manner before pointing his right hand to the lift.

"We can't really talk well like this. Let's head to the lounge upstairs."

Asuna was led to the wide space deep inside the lounge and sat down opposite the doctor. Through the large glass window, they could see the large yard of the hospital and the surrounding greenery. There were very few people around, and only the rustling of the air-con could be heard moving the air.

Asuna wondered which doubts she should raise. However, Doctor Kurahashi broke the silence first.

"Asuna-san, you met Yuuki-kun in the VR world, right? Did she tell you about this hospital?"

"Ah, no...that's not it..."

"Oh, then it's amazing that you managed to find this place. Well, Yuuki-kun once said that a lady called Yuuki Asuna may be coming, and wanted to greet you at the reception area. I was really shocked and asked her whether she told you about the hospital, but she said that she didn't. So I said that she couldn't possibly know about such a place. However, I really got a call from the reception counter, and I was really shocked."

"Well...Yuuki-san, did she mention me to you, doctor...?"

Asuna asked, and the doctor nodded his head hard 2, 3 times.

"Of course. During the past few days, she would always tell me about Asuna-san when we talked to each other. However, Yuuki-kun would start

crying after she talked about you. She's normally not a kid who would reveal her own weakness."

"Eh...bu, but why..."

"She said that she wanted to befriend you more, but couldn't do so. She wanted to meet you, but may not be able to do so. It's not like...I can't understand those emotions..."

At this moment, Doctor Kurahashi let out a rare pained expression. Asuna took a deep breath and decided to ask,

"That Yuuki-san, and her friends all told me this when they bid me farewell in the VR world. Why? Why is it that we «can't meet again»?"

The fear that began the moment Asuna saw the name of the hospital continued to expand, and she tried her best to quell his uneasiness and leaned her body forward. Doctor Kurahashi was wordlessly stunned for a moment, turned his eyes at his hands that were cupped together on the table, and then calmly answered,

"Then, let's start explaining things from the «Medicuboid». Asuna-san, you're an AmuSphere user too, right?"

"Eh...ehhh, yeah."

The young doctor nodded his head, lifted his face, and said something completely unexpected,

"It may be ill-suited to say such words to you, but I felt that it was regretful that FullDive technology was used as a form of amusement at first."

"Eh...?"

"The research of that technology should be funded by the government for treatment. In that case, the current state can be continued for another 1, no, 2 years."

Asuna felt weird about the unexpected change in the direction of the conversation, and the doctor lifted a finger.

"Please think about this. The environment brought about by the AmuSphere would be an effective function in the medical field. For example, that machine would be a gospel to those people who are visually or hearing-impaired. Those people with congenital brain dysfunction are

sadly excluded, but even if the eyeballs or visual nerves have abnormalities, the image can be input directly to the brain if the AmuSphere is used. The situation is the same with hearing. Even those who didn't know about light or sound as they grew up can use that machine to interact with a real landscape."

Asuna could only nod her head as Doctor Kurahashi said that enthusiastically. The wide range of uses of the AmuSphere wasn't a new thing in such an area. One day, the headgear can become smaller, and with a specialized lens combination, those visually impaired will be able to live like those who see.

"Also, what is useful isn't just the fact that it can convey signals, but that the Amusphere has the function to cancel the senses."

The doctor used his finger to tap his throat.

"The electromagnetic pulse that is sent here will temporarily numb the muscles. In other words, it would have the effect similar to total body paralysis. For example, anesthetics. Even if it's used, there's a small but rare risk. If we use AmuSphere in operations, we can avoid having to use anesthetics. That's what I think."

Asuna was already engrossed with what the doctor said. She nodded her head, but immediately noticed something. Though it was like showing off in front of an expert, she still whispered out her doubt.

"...But, it can't work, right? The AmuSphere's interference ability can only limit the senses to the minimum to ease the pain when the scalpel is inserted into the body. I think both the AmuSphere, or even the first generation machine—Nerve Gear can't do it...even if the medulla is blocked, the nerves inside are still active, so spinal reflex is still there, right...?"

"Yes...that's correct."

Doctor Kurahashi first widened his eyes in shock, and immediately nodded several times, as if Asuna had struck the bulls-eye.

"It's just like you said. The AmuSphere's electromagnetic pulse output power is weaker, the CPU is power-efficient, which would cause some problems with the processing speed as it isn't powerful enough. It's possible to do a real dive into the VR world, but the specs would be inefficient when it comes to lens matching in real life, into the so-called

«Alternate Reality». Thus, the world's first medical FullDive machine that's developed at the state-level—«Medicuboid»."

"MediCu...boid."

This term most likely combines the term Medical and Cuboid. Asuna digested this term in her mouth, and the doctor smiled before explaining,

"That's just a coined name. The most important thing is that it strengthens the output of the AmuSphere, increases the density of the particles several fold, increases the processing output and is integrated with a bed, from the head to the spinal cord. It looks like a white box...if this can be used, with the many equipments in the hospital, there would be a drastic change in treatment. Most operations would not require anesthetics then, and it may be possible to talk to patients in a «Locked-in state»."

"Locked-in...?"

"It's a state known as the Locked-in Syndrome, a state where even if the brain's thinking process is normal, the body's handicapped in its control on its parts, and the patient can't express his thoughts. If we use the Medicuboid, we can connect directly deep into the brain, and even if the body doesn't move, it is possible to return to society through the VR world."

"I see...in other words, compared to the AmuSphere that's only used for playing VR games, this is really a dream machine in its true sense, isn't it?"

Asuna inadvertently nodded. However, Doctor Kurahashi, who looked like he was dream-talking, immediately shut his mouth as he heard this, seemingly dragged back to reality. His expression darkened a little, and he took off his spectacles, closed his eyes, and took a long sigh.

Then, he shook his head and smiled in a somewhat sad manner.

"Ehh, it really is a dream machine. However...a machine has its own limitations too. The most anticipated area of use for the Medicuboid...is «Terminal Care»."

"Terminal care..."

Asuna repeated the English term she had never heard of like a parrot, and the doctor silently explained,

"In kanji...it's written as 'Dying Treatment'."

Those words poured down on Asuna like cold water. She widened her eyes and couldn't say anything. Doctor Kurahashi put on his glasses and showed a look of comfort, saying,

"You may feel that it'll be better to stop here if we consider things later. Nobody would blame you even if you make that decision. Whether it's Yuuki-kun or her friends, they were all thinking about you."

However, Asuna never hesitated. No matter what sort of truth she would be told, she wanted to face it straight on, and she believed that she had to do so. Asuna lifted her face and clearly stated,

"No...please carry on. Please. I came here for this."

"Is that so?"

Doctor Kurahashi smiled again, and nodded his head significantly,

"Yuuki-kun once said that if Asuna-san is willing, I am to explain everything to her. Yuuki-kun's ward is at the highest level of the central ward. It'll be rather far, so let's talk on the way there."

The doctor walked out of the lounge and head towards the lift. Asuna followed him from behind, and her mind continued to think of the same term.

Terminal. The meaning of this term couldn't be any clearer. However, she continued to deny herself. It just couldn't be like that. Even if she had to declare that, he didn't have to use such a direct term.

The only plain fact was the truth that's to be shown next. Asuna had to accept it directly. It's because Yuuki believed that Asuna could do this that she allowed Asuna to enter her reality.

There were three lifts lined up in the lobby of the central building, and the rightmost had the tag «Staff Only» on the door. The doctor used the card that was hanging from his neck to slide it down the panel beside it, and a calm beeping sound was heard as the right door slide aside.

Both of them entered the white box, and the lift started to rise as the sound and acceleration couldn't be detected.

"Have you heard of the term «Window Period»"

Doctor Kurahashi suddenly asked, and Asuna started to search through her memory.

"I remember...health class taught of it before. It has something to do with virus...infections, right?"

"Yes. For example, if someone was suspected to be infected with some sort of virus, there would be a blood test. The methods of testing them are as follows. The «Antigen test» that tests the antibodies against the virus in the blood, and the more sensitive «NAT check» that uses the DNA and RNA of the virus as part of the investigation. However, even when using the NAT check, It's impossible to detect the virus after infection for about 10 days or so. This period is called the «Window Period»."

The doctor stopped at this moment. Then, as the slight decelerating feeling was felt, the door opened along with the sound of a bell.

The highest level, level 12 seemed to be prohibited to outsiders as there was a large gate right in front of them as they exited the lift. The doctor again placed his card on the sensor beside the door, and a soft electronic sound came from it. The metal bars were all lowered, with the doctor waving his hand to prompt her, Asuna quickly moved through the door.

Unlike the lower levels, this level didn't seem to have any windows. The smooth white paneled path extended out straight, and there were 2 paths in front of her, left and right.

Doctor Kurahashi, who was walking in front of Asuna again, veered to the left. The inorganic path that was full of warmth and white light continued to extend forward. They went by a few nurses, and the noises from outside couldn't be heard at all.

"—Because of that «Window Period», something must have happened."

Inadvertently, the doctor again said with a calm voice,

"That was the contamination of blood that was donated. Of course, the chances were low. There's only a rare 1 in 100,000 chance of infection through blood transfusion. However, it's impossible in modern science to drop that value to zero.

He sighed. Asuna even felt a faint anger and helplessness from him.

"Yuuki-kun was born in May 2011. Due to dystocia, a caesarean section was done accordingly. At that time...we couldn't confirm it, but an accident

caused a large amount of bleeding, so emergency blood transfusion was implemented. The blood used was, unfortunately, contaminated."

"...!"

Asuna couldn't say anything. Doctor Kurahashi glanced at her, and immediately looked down before continuing,

"Until now, we couldn't understand how it happened. However, it was likely that Yuuki-kun was infected the moment she was born. The father was infected within that month. The virus infection was confirmed during September, by the follow-up blood test taken by the mother after the blood transfusion. By then...the whole family had already..."

The doctor sighed heavily and stopped.

There was a sliding door on the right wall of the passage, and a metal panel was set beside it. On the panel there, the words [First Unique Design Machine Room] were lined on it.

The doctor took the card and slid it down the panel. The electronic sound rang, and with a swoosh, the door opened.

Feeling that her heart was being bounded tightly and painfully, Asuna followed Doctor Kurahashi through the door. Inside it was a long and strangely narrow room.

The wall facing them had a door that was similar to the one they just passed through, and there's a control panel on the right side which had many devices. The wall on the left side had a large glass window, but the glass was dyed black, so it's impossible to look inside.

"In front of us is a sterile room with air control. Please understand that we can't enter."

As he said this, Doctor Kurahashi walked to the black window and operated on the panel below. With a slight rumbling sound, the color of the window became lighter, and then became transparent, showing the image.

It was a small room. No, it was actually rather large. At first glance, it looked like the room was filled with all sorts of machines. There were tall and short ones, simple square-ish ones mixed with those complicated shapes. Thus, it took her a lot of time to notice that there was a bed in the middle.

Asuna forcefully brought her face to the window and stared at that bed.

There was a petite body seemingly half-asleep in the bed. The white blanket was covered to her chest, and she could see the bare skinny shoulders that looked really depressing. The throat and shoulders had all sorts of tubes attached to them, linked to the machines nearby.

It's impossible to see the face of the bed's owner directly as it was covered by a white-cuboid object, integrated into the bed, that nearly swallowed the entire head. What could be seen were thin, almost transparent lips and a sharp chin. A monitor was embedded into the side of the cuboid facing them, and indicators in all sorts of colors pulsed through it. Above that, the word [Medicuboid] could be seen, represented as a plain logo.

"...Yuuki...?"

Asuna used her trembling voice to mutter. She was finally here, with Yuuki in the real world. However, the final few meters were obstructed by the thick glass she couldn't pass through no matter what.

With her back facing the doctor, Asuna squeezed out the voice,

"Doctor...what exactly is Yuuki's condition...?"

The answer was brief yet heavy.

"«Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome»...AIDS."

Chapter 9

The moment Asuna saw this large hospital, she had a premonition that Yuuki had some serious disease. Despite this, once she heard the name of the illness from the doctor clearly, she still felt unable to breathe. Through the glass, Asuna looked at Yuuki as she lay on the bed, and felt completely frozen.

She was wondering whether it was true. Yuuki, who was stronger than anyone, more energetic than anyone when doing anything, was actually lying in the middle of several machines. Whether it was out of reason or emotions, Asuna flat out refused to accept this fact.

—I'm such a big idiot. Not knowing anything and not trying to understand her. As the girl screamed this in her heart, the tears Yuuki shed before she disappeared meant...

"But AIDS isn't as scary as society thinks nowadays."

On seeing Asuna, who was rooted to the spot, Doctor Kurahashi said in a steady voice.

"Even when they're infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, if they can be treated early, it's possible to contain the AIDS virus for about 10, 20 years. Through medication and thorough health management, it is possible to live like one before infection now."

Kii. A slight sound was heard. The consultation doctor was sitting on the chair in front of the console. He then said,

"...However, it's an undeniable fact that the chances of Newborns being able to survive for 5 years after being afflicted with HIV would be a lot lower than adults. Yuuki-kun's mother once wanted to bring everyone down with her when she knew that the whole family was infected. However, her mother was a Christian since young, and through religion and the help of her father, she broke through the initial crisis, and then chose to continue fighting the disease."

"Continue...fighting..."

"Yes. From the moment Yuuki was born, she was forced to fight the virus to survive. Once she broke through the most critical moment, the petite her was able to grow up safely and even enter primary school. For a kid—it's tough to take in a large amount of drugs regularly. Besides, Nucleoside

Reverse Transcriptase Inhibitors are drugs with powerful side effects. However, Yuuki-kun still believed that she would one day be healed and continued to work hard. She was hardworking, and it looked like she had top grades throughout her years in school. She had lots of friends, and I once saw many images of her at that time. She continued to have such a dazzling smile..."

Asuna heard the doctor pause and sigh for a short while,

"—The school didn't know that Yuuki-kun was a HIV carrier. Actually, this is to be expected. Health check-ups carried out by the school or an enterprise are not supposed to include HIV checks in blood. However...just as she went into 4th grade, for some reason, a group of parents of students that were of the same age found out that Yuuki-kun was a carrier. The rumors immediately started to spread...The law stipulated that they shouldn't discriminate against carriers just because they were infected with HIV. However, the sad thing is that not all the people in society are kind...in the beginning, there were people who protested against her coming to school to study, or pranks like calls and letters and so on. Her parents tried their best, but in the end, they had to move, and Yuuki-kun was forced to transfer to another school."

"..."

Asuna could no longer react. She could only straighten her back and listen to the doctor's words.

"And though Yuuki-kun worked hard to go to the new school every day...the cruel thing was that...at this moment, it started. The indicator to show the weakening of the immunization system, the lymph cells CD4 started to decrease drastically. In other words...the AIDS virus had started to take effect. I've always felt that the harmful words of the parents and teachers in her previous school was the reason why she became ill."

The young doctor attempted to continue keeping his voice calm, but the somewhat rushed sound of breathing revealed his true emotions.

"—As the Immune System weakened, she was easily infected by viruses and bacteria that she could normally resist. This situation is called 'Opportunistic Infection'. Yuuki-kun was infected by something called a Pneumocystis Pneumonia and ended up hospitalized here, and that was about 3.5 years ago. Yuuki-kun continued to be positive. She would always

have a smile on her face every day, saying 'I will never lose to the disease'. She never grumbled even during the painful checkups. However..."

Having paused here, the doctor seemed like he started to move.

"Whether it's in the hospital or the patient, there're lots of bacteria and viruses. Once the AIDS virus activates, we can only continue to treat the symptoms that came with the 'Opportunistic Infection'. After the pneumonia, Yuuki-kun was infected with throat candida—At this moment, society was rocked by the Nerve Gear incident, and there was a huge commotion. At that time, there was even a discussion to seal off the FullDive Technology completely. However, the country and some manufacturers finished their research on Nerve Gear in medical treatment...the first experimental Medicuboid was completed at this moment. Also, they moved the machine over to this hospital to start the clinical trials. But even though it was an experiment, the original machine was that scary Nerve Gear, and nobody knew what would happen to the brain if we increased the density output of the electronic pulses over a long period. So in these circumstances, it was really difficult to find any volunteers that were willing to help with the experiment. Once I knew about this...I proposed something to Yuuki-kun and her family..."

Asuna continued to wait for the doctor to continue as she looked at Yuuki on the bed and the white cube-shaped object that seemed to swallow her head.

The center of her head was numb due to cold, but Asuna's confused consciousness was blankly thinking to prevent herself from facing this reality.

From the looks of the early development, Medicuboid probably wasn't a continuation of AmuSphere, but an extension of the Nerve Gear. Asuna was used to the AmuSphere, but she could imagine that pure feeling of the virtual world created from the Nerve Gear. The AmuSphere was a machine that had three, four times the number of safety precautions added since the SAO incident, but the virtual world that was created really couldn't be compared to the first generation in terms of quality.

The Medicuboid was installed with many times the number of pulse generated components compared to the Nerve Gear, and could completely eliminate the feeling of the body, and even had a CPU that had a processing speed that was far superior to the AmuSphere—in other words,

was the overwhelming ability Yuuki displayed in Alfheim because of the outstanding specs of this machine?

Asuna had this idea for a moment, but she immediately rejected the notion. Yuuki's amazing sword skills have exceeded the level which a machine's specs could display. In regards to the talent in battle, Yuuki's ability was enough to match Kirito's, and maybe even beat him.

As far as Asuna knew, the reason Kirito became so strong was because he spent much more time fighting on the frontlines than anyone in those two years where they were imprisoned in SAO. If that's the case, how long had Yuuki been in that world created by the Medicuboid—

"As you can see here, the Medicuboid is a delicate machine."

Doctor Kurahashi, who was silent for a while, started talking again,

"As you can see here, the trial machine of the Medicuboid is one that needs a lot of careful maintenance. In other words, it had to be in a place where the air was free of dust, bacteria and viruses. Once the patient is willing to enter the sterile room, it could drastically reduce the risk of infection. It was because of this that I suggested Yuuki-kun and her family to accept this experiment."

"..."

"However, even now, I would still wonder whether this was the best thing for Yuuki-kun. When treating AIDS, the «QOL»—Quality of Life is something noted to be really important. The doctor has to consider about how to improve and maximize the patient's lifestyle while undergoing treatment. From that sense, the volunteer who accepted this experiment would not be considered good when considering her quality of life. She couldn't leave the sterile room, and couldn't interact with anyone. My proposal really bothered Yuuki-kun and her parents. However, it was probably because of the expectations to this unknown virtual world that made Yuuki-kun decide on this...she agreed to take part in this experiment and entered this room. After that, Yuuki-kun continued to remain in this Medicuboid all this time."

"All this time...you mean...?"

"Just as I said. Yuuki-kun almost never returned to the real world. Or rather, she couldn't. During a hospice treatment, we would use morphine to ease the patient's pain. For Yuuki-kun, we used the Medicuboid's sense

removal function to replace morphine...she has been in all sorts of virtual worlds travelling, other than a few hours a day where data was collected. Of course, I talked to her in that world."

"In other words...she dived in for 24 hours a day...? How long has that been...?"

"About three years."

On hearing the doctor's simple answer, Asuna immediately couldn't say anything.

Before today, Asuna thought that amongst all the users of AmuSphere in the whole world, the ones with the most dive experience should be the old SAO players, including her. But now she knew that she was wrong. This skinny girl lying in front of her was the purest virtual traveler in the world. This was the reason Yuuki became so strong.

—You became a resident of this world already? Kirito once asked Yuuki this. He must have felt that Yuuki was similar to him in some aspects during their short battle.

Asuna realized that a form of belief started to spread inside her. It was like she was standing in front of a swordsman who far surpassed her, offering a beloved sword to this swordsman. She had such a feeling as she closed her eyes, and then lowered her head.

After a moment of silence, Asuna looked back at Doctor Kurahashi,

"Thank you for letting me see Yuuki—she should be alright if she continues to remain here, right? She can continue to journey through that world, right...?"

However, the doctor didn't answer Asuna's question directly. He sat on the chair in front of the control panel, had his hands placed together on his knees, and then stared at Asuna with a steady expression.

"—Even if she's in a sterile room, it's impossible to remove the bacteria and viruses that were in her body. With the weakening of the immune system, they will continue to multiply. Right now, Yuuki-kun's infected by Cytomegalovirus and Non-tuberculous Mycobacteria, and she has almost lost all her vision. The encephalitis caused by the HIV is worsening, and I think she probably won't be able to move her body on her own."

"..."

"She was infected with HIV for 15 years...her AIDS acted up for 3.5 years. Right now, Yuuki-kun's condition is in a terminal state. She clearly knows about this. I suppose you should know the reason Yuuki-kun disappeared right before your eyes."

"How could it...how could it be..."

Asuna widened her eyes and shook her head slightly. However, she couldn't ignore what she just heard with her ears.

Yuuki would always hesitate over whether she should be with Asuna. The reason she did so was because she really cared for Asuna. She did this to prevent Asuna from feeling hurt on the day she had to leave. No, it's not just her. It was because Shiune and the other Sleeping Knights understood the truth that they would have the attitude of a mysterious group.

However, Asuna never noticed it, and never tried to think about it. She merely continued to inflict more pain on Yuuki. On remembering the tears Yuuki shed before she logged out of the Black Iron Palace, Asuna felt an aching in her heart.

At this moment, Asuna thought of something, and she immediately looked at the doctor.

"Then...doctor, does Yuuki have an elder sister...?"

On asking this, the doctor immediately frowned as if he was shocked by this sudden statement, and hesitated for a while, before slowly nodding his head.

"—It's not about Yuuki-kun herself, so I didn't mention it...yes, she has a twin elder sister. It was the caesarian section at the beginning that caused this tragedy."

The doctor seemed to be searching through his memories as he said,

"Her sister's name was Aiko, and she too stayed in this hospital. Both twin sisters weren't similar...the elder sister would always smile in the past, silently protecting the energetic and lively Yuuki-kun. Oh yes...her appearance would resemble you somewhat..."

Why past tense? Asuna muttered deep inside her heart and stared at the doctor. And the doctor seemed to hear the voice in her heart as he added,

"Yuuki-kun's parents...died 2 years ago, and her sister died a year ago."

What she thought she should understand lost all significance.

In that world, Asuna saw many instances of countless people dying, and she herself edged on the borders of death. Thus, she felt that she understood the meaning of life and death. She knew that she couldn't change this fact that happened in front of her even if she struggled.

She only knew Yuuki for a few days, but after knowing of her past and her current situation, Asuna still couldn't accept such a heavy fact, and could only lean her body on the thick glass in front of her. The meaning of the term 'reality' and the significance it had seemed to corrode and blurred, even disappearing completely in the end. Asuna lowered her head and placed her forehead on the icy cold surface.

I've already fought hard, so what's so bad about being insistent with such a little happiness? Asuna always had this thought, which was why she was scared of change, didn't dare to argue with others, and could only find all sorts of excuses for her cowardice and silence.

However, Yuuki was fighting ever since she was born. She continued to wrestle against this cruel reality that tried to take everything away from her. Even after knowing that the end was near for her, she was still able to show such a dazzling smile.

Asuna closed her eyes hard and shouted to Yuuki, who was traveling in a certain distant world, from deep within her heart.

—Let me see you again. Just once.

This time, once they meet, both of them must continue to talk for a long time. Yuuki once said that some things have to be done through forceful means for the other party to understand. If she couldn't shake away her weak side and all her baggage to talk with Yuuki, there was no need for both sides to talk.

Asuna finally felt a warm liquid coming out of her eyes. She placed her right hand on the glass and exerted force into her fingers, looking like she was searching for a certain kind of touch on that slippery surface.

At this moment, a gentle voice came from somewhere.

『Don't cry, Asuna.』

Asuna quickly raised her head, shocked. She shook aside the water droplets on her eyelashes and opened her eyes, staring at Yuuki who was

lying on the bed. The petite profile was no different from before, still lying there. The machine that covered Yuuki's face didn't change at all. However, Asuna noticed a blue light blinking on a monitor panel opposite the glass. The words behind the screen were different from before, showing the words [user talking].



"Yuuki...?"

Asuna murmured, and then spoke with a trembling yet clear voice,

"Yuuki? Are you over there?"

Asuna immediately heard the response. It seemed that the voice came from the microphone installed on the wall,

『Un. It's through the camera, but I can see you, Asuna. Amazing...you look just like you do in-game. Thank you...for coming to see me.』

"...Yuuki...I...I..."

She wanted to say something, but didn't know what she should say. This anxiety that couldn't be described made Asuna's chest feel uncomfortable.

But before she spoke, the voice came from above the head again.

『Doctor, please let Asuna use the neighboring room.』

"Eh..."

Asuna was puzzled and looked around to see Doctor Kurahashi looking serious as he seemed to be pondering about something. However, he immediately showed a steady smile that cleared everything, and nodded his head before saying,

"Alright—there's a seat I use for FullDive to talk and an AmuSphere. The door can be locked from the inside, but please try not to exceed 20 minutes. As for the procedures, I won't be explaining them."

"I...I got it."

Asuna hurriedly nodded, and then looked back at the girl who was lying on the Medicuboid. Yuuki's voice echoed again.

"The application of the ALO launcher is installed inside. Once you log in, we'll meet at the first place we met."

"Un...I got it. Wait a minute, I'll be right there."

Asuna said with a firm voice, bowed to Doctor Kurahashi behind her, and turned around. She took a few steps to the door deep within the observation room and raised her hand at the scanner. The door slid aside, and Asuna immediately darted in.

What was behind the door was a room that was half the size of the observation room. There were two black leather recliners inside, and the headrest on both sides had a familiar ring-shaped helmet.

Asuna hurriedly locked the door, put her bag on the floor and laid down on the nearest chair. She used the button on the handle to adjust the reclining angle of the back, and then raised the AmuSphere before putting it on her head. She took a deep breath, pressed the switch, and there was a white light in front of her. Asuna's consciousness left the real world.

Upon waking up as a rapier user of the water fairy race, Asuna literally flew out of the bedroom of the forest home before her senses even got used to the VR world.

She flapped her wings in the air to glide, and immediately flew out of the window without touching the floor. Right now, It was about dawn in Alfheim, and the thick forest was covered with white fog. She turned in the air and immediately rose quickly, breaking through the white fog as she rose out of the woods. Asuna put her hands close to herself and continued to rush through the center of the level.

It took her less than 3 minutes to reach the air above the main streets. Then, Asuna flew straight to the center of the plaza and landed in front of the transfer gate. As countless players stared at her wide eyed, she turned around and pulled an emergency stop. She then jumped into the portal the moment she stopped.

"Transfer! Panareze!"

The moment she shouted it, a bluish-white light immediately flowed down like a waterfall, pushing Asuna up.

The transfer immediately ended. Once she came out from the transfer gate, it was the main of the central plaza on the 24th level Panareze. Asuna forcefully kicked the stone floor on her right and leaped into the sky. This time, she flew towards an island north of the capital. The girl that was flying at full speed continued to leave afterimages on the water that vibrated.

In a short period of time, she saw the profile of a large tree. It felt like her duel at the base of that tree against «Absolute Sword» Yuuki took place a long time ago. The island that was fully crowded back then could be said to be completely silent.

Asuna slowed down as she went around the tree and got ready to land. As there was a thick layer of fog below, she couldn't see the ground.

Once she stepped onto the grass that was covered with dew, she started to look at the environment around her. Perhaps the light of day wasn't enough as she could only see several meters in front of her. Feeling anxious, Asuna could only move around the woods quickly.

Once she was halfway through and arrived on the eastern side of the trees...light finally came in from the outside, sweeping away the morning mist immediately. Asuna finally found the person she was looking for through the gap between the white curtains.

Yuuki's back was facing Asuna, and her deep purple hair and bluish-purple dress was swaying. At this moment, Asuna could only hold her breath and watch this. The dark elf girl suddenly turned around and stared at Asuna with her amethyst colored eyes. Her light-colored lips showed a frail smile, like snow.

"—For some reason, I just had the feeling that Asuna would try to find me in the real world. I didn't tell you anything, and that couldn't possibly happen."

After murmuring such words, Yuuki smiled again,

"But you still came, Asuna. It's rare for my premonitions to come true, but I was really happy..."

They didn't meet for a mere few days, but it felt like Yuuki's standing posture had a little transparent feeling. This made Asuna feel tight in her chest, as she seemed to be scared, wondering whether the girl in front of her was merely an illusion, as she slowly walked forward, step by step.

The fingers Asuna reached out finally touched Yuuki on the left shoulder. She immediately couldn't hold back the impulse to check Yuuki's body temperature as she silently hugged her with both arms.

Yuuki didn't look panicked at all, as she leaned on Asuna's shoulder like grass swaying with the wind. She still had her armor on, but Yuuki's body still gave a warmth that was enough to move someone's heart. The level of this was more than values that electronic pulses could determine. Asuna heaved a sigh and closed her eyes.

"...When Nee-chan hugged me, she had this smell as well. It was the smell of the sun..."

Yuuki, who rested on Asuna's body, muttered.

At this moment, Asuna finally said her first words through trembling lips.

"Aiko...san? Your sister played VRMMOs too?"

"Un. The hospital allows people to use the AmuSphere in an ordinary room. Nee-chan was the first leader of the Sleeping Knights. She was a lot stronger than me..."

Asuna felt that Yuuki's forehead was leaning hard on her shoulder, and raised her right hand to stroke the silky hair of the dark elf. Yuuki froze for a while, but immediately relaxed, and then continued,

"At the start, there were 9 members of the Sleeping Knights, but including Nee-chan, 3 people have disappeared...so I discussed it with Shiune and the rest, that we would disband the guild once the next person disappears. Before that, we wanted to create wonderful memories together...to talk about an adventure that we hope can make Nee-chan proud..."

"..."

"The place we first met was a medical network called «Serene Garden», a virtual hospice. Even when our illnesses were all different, in the broad sense, we're all people in the same circumstances. We could talk to each other in the VR world, play games, and enjoy our lives to the fullest until the end...this was the intent behind this operation."

Having heard Doctor Kurahashi's words the moment she entered the hospital, Asuna's heart has somewhat felt that the Sleeping Knights, including Yuuki, were all able to be so strong, energetic and calm was because they were all in the same boat.

Even though she already had such a thought, Yuuki's words continued to weigh down heavily on Asuna's mind. Shiune, Jun, Tecchi, Nori, Taruken's cheerful smiles flashed through her mind.

"Sorry for not telling you the truth, Asuna. The reason the Sleeping Knights were about to disband in Spring wasn't because everyone was starting to get busy and didn't want to play games, but that two of us were already declared to not last past March. So...so, that's why we hoped to create our

final memories in that wonderful world. We wanted to leave the proof that we once existed on that Memorial."

Yuuki's voice started to tremble again. However, Asuna could only exert a little more force into her arms that hugged Yuuki.

"However, our attacks weren't successful...everyone discussed it and decided to get someone to help out. Actually, some of us actually objected to it. Once that person knows about our problems, we'll be bothered, and there would be bad memories left behind. In the end, this really happened...sorry...I'm really sorry Asuna. If possible...please forget about us..."

"How can I do so?"

After answering simply, Asuna brought her face to Yuuki's.

"I've never felt bothered, and I never thought that those were bad memories. Being about to meet with you guys, being able to help you guys defeat the boss, I was really happy. Even now...I want to join the Sleeping Knights!"

"...Ahh..."

Yuuki's breathing and body jerked for a moment.

"I'm...really happy to be able to come to this world to meet with Asuna...those words of yours were enough. I'm happy now...I have no regrets..."

"..."

Asuna put both hands on Yuuki's shoulders and slowly moved her body away as she stared at the teary bright amethyst-colored eyes.

"You still have a lot of things you haven't done, right...? There's a lot of places in Alfheim you haven't been to...including the other VR worlds, this world can be said to be unlimited. That's why you can't say that you're satisfied..."

Asuna desperately told Yuuki off, but she merely showed a depressed expression as she looked elsewhere, and then smiled,

"During these three years...we've been through all sorts of adventures in all sorts of worlds. I hope that my final page in my life will be a memory created together with Asuna."

"But...you have lots of things you haven't finished and places you wanted to go to, right..."

She felt that if she agreed with what Yuuki said, this girl in front of her would disappear behind the morning fog. Thus, Asuna frantically tried to convince her. At this moment, Yuuki turned her eyes that were looking afar back at Asuna, and showed a mischievous smile she showed several times in their assault on the boss.

"Yeah...if possible, I want to check out a school."

"Sc...school?"

"I would occasionally go to a school in the imaginary world, but I always felt that it was too peaceful, beautiful and formal. I want to go back to the sort of real school I used to study in."

She blinked, and smiled, before cringing back in an embarrassed manner.

"Sorry, I know this isn't possible. I'm grateful for your thoughts, Asuna, but I'm really contented..."

"—Maybe you really can go."

"...Eh?"

Yuuki continued to blink and stared at Asuna seriously. Asuna continued to summon some memories in her mind and spoke again,

"Maybe you can really go to school..."

Chapter 10

The next day, January 12, 12.50pm, at the north end of the third level of the second school compound.

At a computer room where the sound of the noon break's buzz could be heard slightly, Asuna straightened her back and sat on a chair.

On the right shoulder of her blazer-type uniform, was a dome-shaped machine about 7cm in diameter that was held together by a harness.

Its base was made by cutting away aluminum, and the dome was made from transparent acrylic. One could see the lens inside. There were two cables that were attached to the socket below. One of them was attached to the mobile phone in Asuna's blazer pocket, while the other was attached to a computer on a table nearby.

Kazuto and two other students, who attended the mechatronics course with him, were exchanging words with each other in front of the computer, chatting away as if they were chanting spells.

"I told you that this gyroscope is too sensitive. If you want to prioritize the traceability of the visuals, you want to adjust the parameters here and here."

"But wouldn't there be a lag if there is a sudden action?"

"We can only wait for the optimizing program learning to take effect then, Kazu."

"Aren't you done yet, Kirito-kun? Lunch break is almost over!"

Asuna, who was forced to maintain that position for 30 minutes, let out an anxious voice. Kazuto let out an 'un' and lifted his head.

"The initial settings are OK for now. Erm, Yuuki-san, can you hear me?"

Kazuto wasn't talking to Asuna, but to the dome-shaped device. In the microphone on the machine, «Absolute Sword» Yuuki's own energetic voice came.

『Haii, I hear you loud and clear!』

"Okay, I'm going to adjust the initial settings around the visuals to see if it's alright. When the visuals are clear enough, make a sound."

『Yes, I got it.』

The dome-shaped device on Asuna's shoulder, commonly called the «Double-sided Visual and Hearing message Probe», was a theme that Kazuto's class had started to experiment with and improve on in this world.

Simply put, this device could be connected through the AmuSphere and the Network, creating a direct visual and audio link between people in the virtual world to the real world. It uses the lens and the microphone of the probe to collect data, passes it through Asuna's handphone onto the network, and then to the Medicuboid in the Yokohama North General Hospital and finally to Yuuki, who dived into the specialized virtual world. The lens could freely rotate in the dome-shaped lens with Yuuki's vision to show any images she wanted to see. Right now, Yuuki should be getting the feeling that she's 1/10 of her own body size and sitting on Asuna's shoulder.

As Asuna heard Kazuto's grumblings regarding this research, she immediately thought that this device could be used once she heard that Yuuki wanted to go to school.

Uiin. The device rang on the right shoulder as the lens was adjusted. Yuuki then said 'I see it' as it stopped.

"Alright. That should do for now. Asuna, we added a stabilizer unit, but try not to do anything too sudden. Don't make voices that are too loud too. She can hear it if it's of audible volume."

"Okay, I got it~."

Asuna stretched her back as she answered Kazuto, who nagged about things to be taken note of before standing up. She saw Kazuto plug on the cable linked to the PC and immediately whispered to the probe on the shoulder,

"Sorry, Yuuki. I wanted to bring you around the school, but lunch break is over."

Yuuki's voice immediately came from the mini-microphone.

『It's alright. I'm even more interested in listening to your lesson!』

"Okay, let's say hello to the teacher for the next period."

After waving at Kazuto and his two buddies who managed to finish setting up everything in such a short time and showed tired looks, Asuna walked out of the computer lab.

She went past the corridor, down the staircase, and through the school's link bridge between the compounds. Yuuki would start to cheer whenever she saw anything, but she immediately went silent once they arrived in front of the door tagged 'Staff Room'.

"...What's wrong?"

『Erm...well, I didn't really like coming to the staff room in the past...』

"Fufufu, don't worry. The teachers in this school aren't like that."

Asuna smiled and whispered before opening the door quickly.

"Excuse us!"

『Ex, excuse us!』

Two voices, one loud and one soft rang inside the room at the same time. Asuna then quickly crossed through an entire row of tables.

The fifth period was National Language, and the teacher taking this period was a teacher who was once the head of department in an independent school. He retired, and after which, voluntarily came to this established education facility that was suddenly built. He was almost 70 years old, but was able to successfully operate the network devices throughout this school, and Asuna liked his wise mannerisms.

Because she knew of this teacher's nature, Asuna felt that he probably wouldn't object to Yuuki listening, but still nervously explained the entire situation. The teacher with the nice white hair and beard took a large teacup in his hand as he listened to Asuna's explanation. Once she was done, the teacher nodded and said,

"Un, it's alright. Oh yes, what's your name?"

『Ah, I'm...Yuuki—Konno Yuuki.』

On hearing the immediate answer from inside the probe, the teacher was more or less shocked, but he immediately smiled and said,

"Konno-san, if you want to, please continue coming to class. We're going to start on «Torokko» by Akutagawa. This can only be interesting if you study it till the end."

『Ye...yes, thank you very much!』

As Yuuki and Asuna finished thanking the teacher, the preparatory bell for class rang, and Asuna hurriedly lowered and bowed her head to take her leave. Once they left the staff room, both of them heaved a sigh at the same time.

After looking at each other and smiling, Asuna quickly moved back to the classroom.

Once she got back to her seat, the students around her immediately asked her what the mysterious device on her shoulder was. Asuna explained that Yuuki was hospitalized, and once Yuuki actually spoke up, everyone immediately understood. They started to introduce themselves. Once this ended, the bell for class rang, and the teacher's profile appeared at the door.

As the duty personnel called to greet—the lens of the probe started to move up and down—the teacher who arrived at the podium first stroked his beard on his chin and started with the lesson as usual.

"Eh—and now, we're going to start from page 98 of the textbook, «Torokko» by Akutagawa Ryunosuke. This is a work made when Akutagawa was 30 years old—"

As the teacher explained, Asuna took out her thin tablet-type computer, and then put it in front of Yuuki so that she could see it. However, the next sentence the teacher said nearly caused her to drop the PC from her hands.

"—Then, let's have a student read this from the first paragraph. Konno Yuuki-san, would you please read this passage?"

"Ha?"

『Ye, yes?』

Asuna and Yuuki let out a shocked voice, and there was an immediately ruckus in the classroom.

"Is there a problem?"

Before Asuna could answer the teacher's question, Yuuki already answered loudly,

『Ok, I got it!』

It seemed that the speaker inside the probe had a device that amplified the volume, as Yuuki's voice clearly filled every corner in the classroom. Asuna hurriedly stood up, raised her tablet PC to the lens, tilted her head to the right, and whispered,

"Yuuki...you, you can read it?"

『Of course. I like to read books!』

Yuuki paused for a while after answering, and then started to recite the content of the textbook in an energetic voice.

『...The simple rail laying works between Odawara and Atami was...』

Asuna, who was holding the computer, closed her eyes as she focused as Yuuki recited the passage in cadence.

The screen in Asuna's heart clearly showed that Yuuki, who was wearing a uniform similar to hers, standing right beside her. Asuna was certain that one of these days, this dream would become real. Medical care would improve every year. In the near future, they would definitely be able to discover a drug to eliminate HIV completely, and Yuuki would be able to return to the real world. At that moment, she definitely had to hold her real hand and introduce the school and neighboring streets to her. After school, they had to head to a fast food restaurant far away, eat hamburgers and chit-chat away.

Asuna quietly wiped her tears to prevent Yuuki from noticing. Yuuki continued to recite this classic passage from the previous century, and the teacher never told her to stop. The school afternoon became abnormally quiet, and it felt like the entire school was listening to her.

Yuuki then continued to attend lessons until after the sixth period, and Asuna introduced her to the school environment as promised. Unexpectedly though, a few classmates followed, and everyone tried to talk to Yuuki.

In the end, both of them were finally alone, and as Asuna sat on the bench in the courtyard, the sky became orange.

『Asuna...thank you very much for today. I'm happy...I definitely won't forget today.』

Yuuki suddenly said in a serious tone, and Asuna instinctively replied in a cheery voice,

"What are you saying? Didn't the teachers say that you can come every day? Japanese is in the third period tomorrow. You can't be late! Speaking of which...well, do you have any other place you want to see? Anywhere is fine, aside from the principal's office."

Yuuki chuckled, and then went silent. After a while, she timidly said,

『Well...I have a place I want to go to...』

"Where?"

『Will somewhere outside the school do?』

"Eh..."

Asuna couldn't help but shut up. She pondered for a while, but decided that the battery of the probe would still last, and Yuuki should be able to see it as long as the handheld terminal was connected to the net.

"Un, it's alright. It's fine if the handheld antenna can reach it."

『Really? It's...slightly far...I want you to bring me to Hodogaya in Yokohama, a place called Tsukimidai.』

From where the school was, Asuna and Yuuki took the central line from the Western Tokyo area and went on to Hodogaya, Yokohama.

They weren't exactly whispering to each other on the train, but once they got onto the road, Asuna ignored the surrounding stares and continued to talk to the two-way probe on her shoulder. Yuuki never expected that the streets would have changed so much during the 3 years which she was hospitalized, so Asuna would lean over to explain to her whenever there was something she was interested in.

As they continued to walk and stop, the large clock in the center of the train station showed that it was past 5.30pm when they alighted at their destination, Hoshikawa Station.

They looked up at the sky that turned from crimson red to dark purple, and Asuna took a deep sigh. Perhaps it was because there were a lot of forests nearby that it felt that the cold air here felt different from Tokyo's.

"This street is really pretty, Yuuki. The sky looks wide."

Yuuki said in an energetic yet embarrassed tone,

『Un...sorry, Asuna. My stubborn request made you stay back so late...are you alright, Asuna?』

"It's alright! It's common for me to head back home late!"

She instinctively said that, but in fact, Asuna would pretty much be home before dinner almost all the time. That was because her mother would be unhappy if she did not do so. However, she felt that it didn't matter even if she went home and got thoroughly scolded. As long as Yuuki hoped, and the battery of the probe was enough, it didn't matter how far she would go.

"I'll send a message."

Asuna said in a carefree tone, and then took her mobile phone out. She continued to send a message to her computer at home while being connected to the probe, saying that she would be home late. Her mother would be sending a message to her for ignoring the curfew and would sometimes even personally call her, but if the phone was connected to the net, the call would probably be sent to voicemail.

"All okay now. Then, where do you want to go, Yuuki?"

『Erm...turn left from in front of the station, and then turn right on the second traffic light...』

"Nn, got it."

Asuna nodded, and then started moving forward. With Yuuki leading her, she went through the little shopping street in front of the station.

Yuuki would say a few words as if she was reminiscing when they moved through the bakery, the fish shop, the post office or the front of the shrine. Soon, they arrived at the residential area. Yuuki sighed as she saw a house with a large dog house and large camphor trees.

Thus, even if Yuuki didn't say it, Asuna understood that this street was the one she once lived in. And right in front of both of them was—

『...After making the turn on the right, please stop in front of a white house...』

Asuna noticed it. Yuuki's voice was already trembling when she said that. She went past the park with a row of bare poplar trees, turned right, and immediately saw a white-tiled bungalow on the left side.

After walking a few steps forward, Asuna stopped in front of the bronze gate.

『...』

On her shoulder, Yuuki sighed for a long while. Asuna inadvertently reached the finger of her left hand, placed it under the aluminum probe, and whispered to her,

"That's...Yuuki's house, right?"

『Un...I never thought that I would be able to see this house again...』

This house with the white walls and green roof obviously looked smaller than the surrounding residences, but it had a wide garden. The table on the grass patch had a white wooden bench, and there was a large flower bed surrounded by red bricks deep inside the garden.

However, right now, the table's color had faded because of wind erosion, and what was left of the flowerbed was only black soil and dry, wilted grass. The windows on both sides of the house showed a warm and cozy orange of a family's harmony, but the windows in the white house had the rain cover put down. It looked like nobody lived in the house.

However, this was to be expected. Of the parents and two daughters who once lived together in this house, only one was left. Right now, the last one was in an airtight room, lying on a bed surrounded by machines, and unable to leave that place.

The house became a deep purple under the last ray of sunlight. Asuna and Yuuki just stared at it like that. After a while, Yuuki whispered,

『Thank you Asuna. Thank you for bringing me to such a far place...』

"Do you want to take a look inside?"

It would be bad if passers-by saw this, but Asuna still asked this. Yuuki herself merely shook the lens left and right.

『No, this is okay. Here...we have to go back now, or else it'll be quite late, Asuna.』

"It's still early...we can still stay until later."

Asuna instinctively answered this and turned over to look behind her. What was opposite the long and narrow road was a park, and outside the park, there was a wall of trees with stones as the base.

Asuna moved across the street and sat on the stone wall that was knee high. The front of the probe could capture the image of the small house that was in slumber. Over here, Yuuki's eyes should be able to see the entire house and yard.

Both of them stayed silent for a while, and Yuuki finally said calmly,

『We only stayed here for less than a year...but back then, every single day, I remembered them all. We stayed at an apartment before that, so I was happy that we had a garden here. Mama was scared that we would be infected with complications, but nee-chan and me would often run about in the garden. We would roast meat in front of that bench, and would often make bookshelves with Dad. We were really happy back then...』

"That's great. I never did those kind of things before."

Asuna's house had what could be said to be an overly wide garden, but she didn't remember playing there with her parents or her brother. She would always be alone playing house or drawing. Thus, the family memories Yuuki talked about reverberated strongly through her heart.

『Then, we'll have a roast meat party at your house on the 22nd level next time.』

"Un!...then, it's a promise. I'll invite my friends and Shiune and the rest over..."

『Wa, I have to make lots of meat then. Jun and Thatch really can eat.』

"Really? They didn't look like it!"

Both of them laughed, and then, they looked over at Yuuki's house again.

『Right now...my relatives are arguing over this house.』

Yuuki muttered as she sounded a little lonely.

"What do you mean by they're arguing so much...?"

『Like whether they should tear it down and remake it into a convenience store or turn it into empty land and sell it, or rent it out directly...everyone has their own suggestions. Before that, Papa's elder sister would even dive in to meet me. She knew that I was sick, and avoided me in the real world...yet came here...and told me to write a will...』

"..."

On hearing that, Asuna couldn't help but gasp.

『Ah, sorry. I shouldn't be grumbling about such things to you randomly.』

"It...it's okay—just say it, let it all out until you feel comfortable."

Asuna finally managed to squeeze out a calm voice. On hearing that, Yuuki used the probe to nod.

『I'll continue then. In the end...I told her this. In the real world, I can't hold a pen or stamp, so how can I write a will? In the end, aunt was gobsmacked and speechless.』

Fufufu, Yuuki chuckled at this point. Asuna smiled back at her.

『And then, I requested her to keep this house back then. As for the maintenance fees, Papa's inheritance should be enough to cover it for about 10 years. But...I don't think it would be enough. I guess it'll most likely be torn down. So, I wanted to look at this house before that happens...』

Yuuki was probably using the lens to zoom in on several parts of the house as Asuna's right ear could hear the servo control device letting out a slight sound. On hearing Yuuki's reminiscing voice, Asuna, who had lots of mixed feelings, finally said what she wanted to say.

"Then...do it."

『Eh...?』

"You're 15, right, Yuuki? Once you're 16, get married to someone you like. That person can continue to protect this house for you..."

Once she said that, Asuna realized that she had said something wrong. If Yuuki really liked someone, that person would be one of the males amongst the Sleeping Knights. And these members were fighting diseases

that were difficult to cure, and someone had even been told that he only had a few months left to live. In that case, even if Yuuki got married, the situation wouldn't change much, and would even become more complicated. Besides, one had to consider the other party's situation and feelings when it came to marriage...

But after a moment of silence, ahahahahaha, Yuuki started laughing.

『Ahahaha, A, Asuna, you're amazing! I see. I never thought about that. U~n, that may be a good idea. If it's a marriage certificate, I might try writing it—but I don't have any partner~』

Asuna cringed and asked Yuuki who was still laughing,

"Is, is that so...? I noticed that you and Jun have quite a good relationship."

『Ah, no no. he's still a kid! Oh yeah...erm...』

Yuuki suddenly said in a mischievous tone,

『Asuna...do you want to get married with me?』

"Eh..."

『Ah, but you have to join my family in that case, Asuna, or else I would become Yuuki Yuuki.』

Fufufu, as Yuuki laughed, Asuna could only roll blank white eyes. Every year, the media would report that Japan was ready to accept homosexual marriages lawfully, like in America, but there wasn't any bill introduced—after hearing that, Asuna immediately wavered, and Yuuki chuckled happily again,

『Sorry sorry, I was just joking. You have someone you like, right? That person who helped adjust the lens for me, right...』

"Eh...that...un, well..."

『You have to be careful~』

"Heh...?"

『That guy also seems to be living in a world different from reality, in a different sense from me.』

"..."

Asuna wanted to think carefully about what Yuuki meant, but her confused brain couldn't calm down no matter what. She rubbed her face that was becoming red, and Yuuki used the lens to look at the side of her friend's face before saying in a steady voice,

『Thank you very much, Asuna. I'm already happy that I could see this house again. Even if the house disappears in the future, my memories will remain here. My Papa, Mama, nee-chan, our happy memories together, will always be here...』

Asuna knew that the 'here' Yuuki referred to wasn't the land that the house was on, but her own heart.

This house's gentle and peaceful state finally left a deep impression in Asuna. She then nodded hard, and Yuuki continued,

『...If nee-chan and I cried as we couldn't take the pain with the medication, Mama would talk to us about Lord Jesus. She said that the Lord Jesus wouldn't give us pain which we couldn't endure. I would then pray with Mama and nee-chan. But back then, I was a little angry, because I didn't want to hear about the Bible, but Mama's words...』

In this short time, the sky had become completely deep blue, and there were even a few bright red stars starting to flicker.

『But as I saw this house again, I understood. Mama was actually talking to me all the time. She wasn't saying it with her words...but her heart. She continued to pray for me, allowing me to go on until the end...I finally understand now.』

Asuna's eyes seemed to see the mother and two daughters kneeling near the window at the white house, looking up at the sky and praying. She looked like she was guided by Yuuki's calm voice, and said the words that were jammed deep inside her.

"I've...I've...been unable to hear my mother's voice. Even when we face each other, I can't hear her heart. She never even bothers to understand my words. Yuuki, you said that we have to sometimes use forceful means for the other party to understand our intentions, right? What should I do to be like you, Yuuki...? What should I do to be as strong as you...?"

To Yuuki, whose parents have died, these words may have tugged at her wounds. Normally, Asuna would think about this and wouldn't be able to say it out. But at this moment, what came from Yuuki through the probe on

the shoulder was a fortitude and gentleness that melted Asuna's mental wall away completely.

Yuuki answered Asuna's question with a bothered answer,

『I'm...not strong here, you know?』

"That's not right. You won't be scared because of how other people look and back away. You're always...always so natural."

『Un...but, when I used to be in the real world, I often felt that I wasn't acting like myself. I know Papa and Mama were sorry for giving birth to nee-chan and me...so I felt that I had to give them an energetic look and pretend that I wasn't bothered over whether I was sick or not. Maybe it's because of this that I could only show myself like this once I entered Medicuboid. Perhaps, I was naturally a kid who hated everything around me, screaming and shrieking all day long.』

"...Yuuki..."

『But then, I thought later. It's alright even if it's an act...even if I pretend to look strong, it's alright. If I can increase the time that a smile remains on my face, it would be enough. You know that I don't have much time...so I felt that when interacting with others, wouldn't it be a waste of time if I try to guess people's feelings all the time? I might as well as present the most realistic side of me. It doesn't matter even if I get hated, it doesn't matter. Besides, I managed to end up in that person's heart.』

"...That's right...it's because of your attitude, Yuuki, that we became such good friends in these few days..."

『No, that's not because of me. It's because even if I tried to run away, you would persist and chase after me, Asuna.—Yesterday, when I saw you in the observation room, when I heard your voice, I understood your intentions completely. Once I knew that this person would still be willing to face me even after knowing that I was ill...I was really...really so happy that I cried out.』

Yuuki choked a little, and she continued,

『So...try using that feeling to talk to your mother. I think that if the will is there, she would definitely understand how you feel. It's alright. You're a lot stronger than me, Asuna. Really. Sometimes, both sides can only understand each other's feelings by ignoring everything else...it's because

you came to me, Asuna, and showed your true self, that I felt 'if it's this person, I can definitely hand this over to you'.』

"...Thank you. Thank you very much, Yuuki."

After finally squeezing these words out, Asuna lifted her head to hide the tears in her eyes. She also found that in the sky of this capital that would not become completely dark, there were still some stars flickering hard as they tried not to lose to the artificial light.

Once they returned to the station, the battery alarm of the probe suddenly rang. Asuna and Yuuki agreed to turn up for lessons tomorrow, and Asuna cut off the power to the mobile phone.

It was past 9pm once Asuna took the train back to her house in Setagaya.

The girl heard the sound of the door opening as it echoed loudly through the icy cold air of the corridor hall, and sighed deeply. Her right shoulder still felt the weight of Yuuki sitting there. Asuna used her left hand to lightly grab the warm spot she left behind, took off her shoes and quickly walked to her room.

She changed into her indoor clothes and immediately came over to the corridor. Her destination was the room of her elder brother, Kouichirou, which was also deep inside the 2nd level. Asuna felt that Kouichirou, who was hardly at home, like her father, probably wouldn't be home yet, but she knocked on the door, and as expected, there was no response inside. She then opened the door on her own, similar to the first day the SAO server began operating, and walked in.

There were no furnishings inside. In the center of the plain room, there was a somewhat large office table placed there. The thing Asuna wanted to find was on the left side of the table. It was the AmuSphere Kouichirou used to set up meetings in the virtual world.

Kouichirou's AmuSphere could be said to be a lot newer than his sister's. Asuna grabbed the headgear and returned to her room. She then installed the memory card of ALO Aincrad into the card slot on the side of the machine, laid on the bed, adjusted Kouichirou's AmuSphere till it fit her, and put it on.

Once she turned on the power, the machine started its connecting sequence. She was then brought to the ALO log in space. However,

having dived into the kingdom of elves, Asuna didn't use her familiar main account, but a side account she would occasionally use when trying to act as someone else.

She appeared at a living room of the house in the forest on the 22nd level. However, her body wasn't that of the familiar Undine named «Asuna», but another Sylph character called «Erika». She checked her clothing, put the two daggers on her waist into the chest, and summoned her menu to press the temporary log-out command button.

After a few more seconds of diving, Asuna immediately found herself back in her room in reality. She took off the AmuSphere, but the blue connecting indicator continued to flicker on the machine. This showed that the connection to the VR world was on suspension. She could immediately skip the log-in process and return to the game by putting on the headgear and switching on the power.

Asuna held her brother's AmuSphere in her hand and immediately got up. Due to the high powered router and wireless network that had a large range, she could remain connected no matter which part of the house she was in.

She opened the door and arrived on the corridor. This time, she used somewhat heavy footsteps to walk down the stairs.

She looked at the living room and the dining, found the tables were already tidied, and couldn't find her mother anywhere. Asuna continued to walk deeper, and saw a slight ray of light from below the door at the end. It was her mother's study.

She stopped in front of the door, then raised her right hand as she got ready to knock, but just couldn't take the next step.

Since when did coming to my mother's room become such a terrifying thing? Asuna bit her lips as she thought. However, the reason why it became like this was largely because of Asuna herself. As she didn't pass her thoughts seriously, her mother couldn't understand her real feelings. It was Yuuki who made her realize this.

The girl felt a small hand pushing her right shoulder. At the same time, a voice rang,

—It's alright. You can do it, Asuna...

Asuna nodded her head, forcefully took a deep breath, and then knocked the door hard.

Quickly, a slight 'please come in' voice came from behind the door. Asuna turned the handle, turned her body sideways into the room, and grabbed the door handle.

Kyouko was facing the thick teak table as she continued to type on the keyboard of the tabletop PC. She continued to type at the keyboard loudly for a while, and then forcefully pressed the enter button even harder before leaning her back on her chair. The mother pushed the glasses and looked at her daughter's eyes, seemingly harboring an invisible impatience.

"...Why did you come back so late?"

Kyouko said, and Asuna immediately lowered her head to apologize,

"Sorry."

"I handled dinner already. If you're hungry, find something to eat inside the fridge. The school transfer application I mentioned to you before will only last until tomorrow. You have to finish it by tomorrow morning."

Once Kyouko finished saying that, her hands returned to the keyboard, and Asuna said the words she wanted to say to her mother first.

"Mom, about this...I want to talk to you."

"Say it here then."

"I can't explain it here."

"Then where?"

Asuna didn't answer as she walked to Kyouko. She then reached her left hand out to point at something that was dangling behind her—the AmuSphere that was in suspend mode.

"The VR world...just for a while. I hope that you can come with me to some place."

Kyouko glanced at the silver ring for a moment, and seemed to see something she hated as she frowned. Then, she looked like she had nothing better to say as she waved her right hand.

"I don't want to wear such a thing. If we can't even talk face to face, I'm not going to listen."

"Please Mom. Please look at this, for just 5 minutes..."

Normally, Asuna would apologize and leave the room. However, she continued to take a step forward and closed in on Kyouko, before saying,

"Please, you must come here with me so that I can express my current thoughts and feelings. Just once...I want Mom to see my world."

"..."

Kyouko frowned even harder as she merely kept her mouth shut and stared at Asuna. Several seconds later, she sighed hard.

"—Just 5 minutes. Also, no matter what you say, Mom won't allow you to remain in that school. Once you're done, you have to fill in the application form."

"Okay..."

Asuna nodded and handed over the AmuSphere in her hand. Kyouko frowned and gave a look like she wasn't willing to touch such a thing, but received the device and put it over her head with a stiff motion.

"How do I operate this?"

Asuna quickly adjusted the belt, and then said,

"Once you switch on the power, it will automatically connect. Please wait for me when you enter."

Kyouko nodded her head slightly and leaned on the chair. Asuna then pressed the power switch on the right side of the AmuSphere. The net connection indicator light continued to flicker irregularly, and Kyouko's body immediately lost its strength.

Asuna hurriedly ran out of the study, sprinted through the corridor and the stairs and returned to her own room. She leapt on the bed and immediately put on the AmuSphere she normally used.

After pressing the power switch, a firing-shaped light appeared in front of Asuna, and her consciousness left the real world.

Asuna landed in the familiar white wooden living room in her Undine main character, and immediately looked around for «Erika». She immediately saw her. The light grass-colored short-haired Sylph was sitting in front of the full-body sized mirror beside the cutlery sideboard and looking at herself.

Asuna went close, and Erika/Kyouko turned behind slightly, frowning in the exact same manner as she would in the real world.

"It's strange to see a different face act according to my own will. And..."

She used her toes to tiptoe up and down.

"My body feels extremely light."

"Of course. This character's weight is about only 40kg. it should be a lot different from your weight in real life, Mom."

Asuna smiled as she said that, and Kyouko again frowned unhappily,

"How rude. I'm not that heavy—speaking of which...your face here really looks like the one in the real world."

"Un...yeah."

"However, your real figure seemed to be a little plumper."

"You're the rude one, Mom. I'm completely the same as I am in the real world."

As both of them talked, Asuna thought. When was the last time she could talk to Kyouko like that? She wanted to keep this conversation going, but Kyouko had her arms folded in front of her chest, indicating an attitude of which no random talk would be entertained.

"There is no time. What do you want to show me?"

"...Come over here"

Asuna sighed lightly as she crossed the living room and opened the small room that was normally used as a storeroom. She waited for Kyouko to move her imaginary feet over, and led her to a window deep inside the room.

In the living room facing south, one could see a painting-like scenery that included a wide hall that was covered with a lawn, a small track, a gradual

hill and a small lake behind it. However, there was a small garden full of weeds and a small stream to the window in the north where the utility room was. There was also a coniferous forest that was nearby. Also, in this season, it seemed everything was buried in snow, as only a uniform color could be seen.

But this was what Asuna wanted Kyouko to see.

Asuna opened the window, looked at the deep forest and said,

"How is it? Don't you find it familiar?"

Kyouko frowned again, shook her head slightly and said,

"Like what? It's just an ordinary coniferous forest—"

What she wanted to say next seemed to be taken away. Kyouko's mouth was left half-open as she looked like she was looking at a scenery far away. At this moment, Asuna silently whispered to the side of her face,

"You remembered... Ojii-chan and Obaa-chan's house, right?"

Asuna's grandparents, Kyouko's parents, were farmers in the hills of Miyagi Prefecture. Their house was located in a village past the hills, and the land were all terraces that were carved out from the hillside. They did not have any machines to help with the farming. The main produce they offered was rice, but the amount they could produce was only enough for a family to last through a year.

In such an environment, they were still able to provide Kyouko with a college education because of the coniferous hill her ancestors left behind. Their old wooden house was built at the foot of the hill. Whenever one sat on the edge of the corridor in the house, the little garden and river could be seen along with the deep coniferous hill.

But compared to the Yuukis' main house in Kyoto, Asuna preferred to head over to 'her grandparents house in Miyagi' ever since she was young. During summer or winter break, she would beg the adults to bring her here, and she would then sleep with her grandparents and listen to them talk about many folk stories. During the summer, she would sit on the corridor and eat shaved ice, and during mid-winter, she would dry persimmon stems with her grandmother. There were all sorts of memories there, but Asuna remembered the scene most vividly; she hid under the old kotatsu

in the middle of winter, eating oranges and staring at the coniferous forest outside the window.

Her grandparents didn't understand what was so nice about the forest, but Asuna would just look like her soul was sucked in as she continued to look at the black branches in the white snowy scene. She would look like a little mouse hiding in a hole under the pile of snow, waiting for spring to arrive, surrounded by an inexplicable feeling that was of a little fear and warmth as she continued to stare into that coniferous forest.

Her grandparents died when Asuna was in second year. The terrace and the hill were all sold, and the house no one stayed in was also torn down.

Thus, Asuna bought this 22nd level wooden house in Aincrad that was very different from the house in the hills Miyagi, whether it was physically or virtually. After seeing the coniferous forest that was covered under the large pile of snow from the north window, she felt so homesick that she had wanted to cry.

Asuna was clear that Kyouko didn't miss the poor farmer's life at all. However, she wanted to let Kyouko see this scene from the window. She wanted to let her mother see this scene she could see every day and yet tried to forget.

Unwittingly, the promised 5 minutes passed, but Kyouko continued to look at the coniferous forest silently. Asuna went beside her and slowly spoke,



"Do you remember the Obon Festival in my first year in Middle school? Dad, Mom, and Nii-san all went to Kyoto, and I was the only one who insisted on going to Miyagi. Then I really ran there on my own."

"...I remember."

"At that time, I apologized to Ojii-chan and Obaa-chan that you wouldn't be able to make it, Mom, that you were really sorry."

"At that time...the Yuuki family had a legal matter we had to attend to no matter what..."

"No, I'm not blaming you, Mom. That's because...when I apologized, Ojii-chan and Obaa-chan immediately took out a thick photo album. I was really shocked when I saw the contents. –everything was about you, Mom, whether it was your thesis in the beginning, or the documents you sent to all sorts of magazines, or the reports of your interviews, they were all archived neatly. Even the documents published on the internet were printed and stuck in. But both of them shouldn't be able to use the computer..."

"..."

"Then, Ojii-chan showed me the contents of the photo album and said that you're the most important treasure to him, Mom. He even said that he was really happy that you left the town to study in college, became a scholar and wrote all sorts of theses that were published in magazines and became even more outstanding. You would be so busy with your theses and studies that you couldn't make it back during an Obon festival, and it was to be expected, yet they never showed any displeasure..."

Kyouko merely stared at the forest as she silently watched Asuna. The sides of her face didn't show any emotion, but Asuna still continued to move her mouth,

"After that, Ojii-chan even added this. He said—Mom may end up being tired someday and need to rest or check where she went through. They will protect this home for that moment...when Mom needs assistance, they could still say 'you can come back here'. They will continue to protect this house and hill."

Asuna said as her mind recalled her maternal grandparents' house that didn't exist anymore. She then overlapped it with the white house she saw several hours ago. They were both spiritual homes. Even if it was

physically gone, it would continue to exist in some people's hearts forever. To Asuna, this virtual world's 'House of Forest' was such a place.

This house would disappear one day, but in a certain sense, it would not disappear for real. That was because a so-called house wasn't just a building with a form—but something that kept the souls, emotions and way of life, like her grandparents.

"—In the past, I couldn't understand what Ojii-chan said, but recently, I could finally understand it. It's not only about telling me to work hard throughout my life...using someone's happiness as my own happiness is also a way of life."

Asuna's mind immediately thought of the faces of Kirito, Lisbeth and company, Yuuki, Shiune and company.

"...I want to choose a way of life where the people around me can smile and live. I want to live a life where I can support people when they feel tired. Thus—I want to learn more knowledge and other things in this loving school."

Asuna continued to ponder about her words, and finally said these words out.

However, Kyouko kept her mouth shut as she continued to look at the forest in front of her. Her dark green eyes showed a blank glow, and it was hard to read her inner thoughts.

The small room was shrouded in silence for a few minutes after that. Under the snowy field of large woods, two little animals that looked like rabbits were happily jumping about. Asuna's gaze was immediately attracted by that, but once she looked back to see Kyouko's face, she immediately held her breath.

A tear rolled down Kyouko's white crystal-like face and continued to drip onto the floor. Her lips were trembling, but the voice was so inaudible it was impossible to hear what she was saying.

After a while, Kyouko found herself crying and frantically used her hands to wipe her tears.

"Wait...what is this. I, I didn't want to cry out..."

"...Mom, it's impossible to hide your tears in this world. Nobody can stop crying when they feel like it."

"That's really inconvenient."

After letting out such words, Kyouko continued to rub her eyes, and seemed to have finally given up as she used both hands to cover her own face. After a while, a slightly sobbing noises could be heard from deep inside her throat. Asuna hesitated a few times before finally putting her hand lightly on Kyouko's trembling shoulder.

The next morning.

Sitting in front of the table at breakfast, Kyouko went back to how she was before. She was looking at the news on the tablet monitor. Asuna said good morning to her, and both of them silently tucked in. Asuna was mentally prepared for her mother to order her to hand over the transfer application. However, Kyouko merely looked at Asuna with a slightly sterner expression than usual, and suddenly said,

"Are you mentally ready to support someone for the rest of your life?"

Asuna hurriedly nodded her head.

"U...un."

"—However, you have to make yourself strong enough in order to support someone else. That's why you have to finish your university education. You have to get better grades than now in the third semester so that you can get into a good one."

"...Mom...that transfer..."

"Didn't I say it? I'll decide according to your grades. Do your best."

Once Kyouko said that, she stood up and hurriedly left the dining room. Asuna heard the sound of the door closing loudly, and then lowered her head slightly, before whispering 'Thanks, mom'.

Asuna changed into her uniform, took her bag, and was about to leave the house, keeping a solemn and gracious attitude. However, once she stepped out of the door, she started running at full throttle on the road as if it were a layer of thin ice, and her face naturally beamed.

She really wanted to immediately tell Kazuto that she could continue to study in the same school as him. She also wanted to immediately tell Yuuki that she had patched up her relationship with her mother.

Asuna passed through the crowd moving towards the station, and couldn't restrain herself from smiling at all.

3 days later, Asuna followed up on the promise she had made with Yuuki and carried out a large barbeque in front of the house of forest.

The ones who took part were her own friends, Kirito, Lisbeth, Klein, Lyfa, Silica, Yuuki, Shiune and the members of the Sleeping Knights. Also, even the leaders of the tribes, Sakuya, Alicia, Eugene and their aides came over. They even formed a small hunting group to fill this large group that had more than 30 people.

Before toasting, Asuna introduced the members of the Sleeping Knights to everyone. She hid the fact that they were asleep, but with Yuuki and company's agreement, she told them that they were an elite squad that wandered through several VRMMO and what memories they hoped to leave in ALO before disbanding.

The rumors that a mysterious Guild of only 7 people defeated the boss on the 27th level and that the «Absolute Sword» managed to beat more than 60 people in duels seemed to be widespread in Alfheim, so Sakuya, Eugene and company immediately tried to invite them to join their sides. Yuuki smiled as she refused them, but if the Sleeping Knights really were to become mercenaries of a certain tribe, the balance of power between the 9 spirit clans would change greatly, and would affect the 2nd edition's grand quest that was under way.

After a loud and rowdy toast, the party that stormed in like the wind started. Asuna and Yuuki started to eat and drink as they continued to talk. There was even a discussion of taking down the 28th level boss. Everyone then used this enthusiasm to take a tour into the 28th level dungeon, and just like that, a large group of people broke into the highest area of the 28th Dungeon to defeat the large crustacean type boss monster, but after that, it was just random talk and gossip.

Unfortunately, only Yuuki and Kirito, the party leader, and a few names were engraved on the Monument of Swordsmen. However, everyone agreed to let the Sleeping Knights challenge the 29th level, and so they disbanded.

Besides her adventures in Alfheim, Yuuki would use the two-way probe in the real world every day to attend Asuna's lessons. They even visited the Kirigayas in Kawagoe, and they went to Agil's café in Okachimachi.

At the beginning, Yuuki felt extremely wary when she faced the overly sensitive Kazuto. However, both of them were one-handed sword users, and after they talked to each other, Yuuki immediately opened her heart and started to talk passionately with Kazuto about the sword skills in ALO and the development of the probe in the real world. The way the two of them continued to chat with each other sometimes even made Asuna feel jealous. The other members of the Sleeping Knights also became friends with Lisbeth and Lyfa, and started planning all sorts of interesting activities.

It was February.

As promised, Asuna and the Sleeping Knights took down the boss of the 29th level as one party, and everyone in Alfheim knew their name. In the middle of the month, there was a united dueling tournament. Kirito, who was on the east block, and Yuuki, who was on the west block, continued to rack up victories and reached the finals, where the net broadcast channel «MMO Stream» showed a live telecast, bringing the entire atmosphere in the activity to its maximum.

As numerous players held their breaths, Yuuki and Kazuto used high level sword skills, including their own OSS, showing an abnormally dazzling and intense battle. This battle lasted more than 10 minutes, and finally, Yuuki used a brilliant god-like skill to defeat Kirito in 11 straight hits, and the crowd immediately roared and cheered in a way where it could shake the entire virtual world.

Having defeated Kirito, who made lots of legends—even though he didn't use his Dual Blades skill—«Absolute Sword» Yuuki was crowned the 4th champion of the tournament, and her name spread through the whole game of ALO, becoming a famed person throughout all users of «The Seed» Nexus.

Soon, it was March.

Asuna, who fulfilled the promise she made with her Mom through her end-of-term exams, was now on a 3 day 2 night trip to Kyoto with the probe on her shoulder, Rika (Liz), Keiko (Silica), Suguha (Lyfa) and Yui in her phone. At this point, the information collected by the probe could be shared to multiple users, so aside from Yuuki, Shiune, Jun and the rest could join them on the trip. Asuna's introduction to each tourist attraction was even more energetic.

They used the Yuukis' spacious rooms fully at night for their accommodation, and the budget they managed to save allowed them to head to the bright Kyoto restaurants to feast in. However, the taste of the food couldn't be passed through the probe to the people, and Yuuki and the rest continued to grumble that Asuna and company were too sly. Asuna could only promise them that she would make a similar tasting dish in the VR world, and Asuna herself ended up working hard in the VR kitchen for a few days.

Everything went by like a dream. Asuna and Yuuki went on a long journey together in both the virtual world and the real world. They had a lot of places they wanted to head to, and Asuna believed that they would have a lot of time.

On a certain day not too far away from April, the cold wind that came from the **sea of Okhotsk** caused Kanto to have a rare heavy snowfall in this season.

The thick snow that seemed to fully cover the presence of spring was starting to melt under the weak daylight.

At this moment, Asuna's phone received news from Doctor Kurahashi, stating that Yuuki's condition was worsening.

Chapter 11

Asuna stared at the short message on the little screen of her mobile phone and repeated the same words inside her heart.

How was this possible!?

How was this possible? Yuuki had been actively taking part in all sorts of activities, and Doctor Kurahashi even said that the tumor inside her head had disappeared. In recent years, there have been cases of people being able to hold back the inhibition of the virus after being infected by HIV for more than 20 years. Yuuki's only 15...her life was about to begin! Her condition was worsening, but up till now, she had several opportunistic infections that caused her to fall ill, so Yuuki would definitely be able to hang on.

But Asuna herself had another premonition. This was the first time the doctor sent a message to her directly. In other words, this should be a notice—that the moment had arrived. Every night, she would dread that moment, but would always try her best to shake off that notion. Right now, the time has come.

The girl had two conflicting thoughts in her as she remained stunned on the spot for a few seconds before blinking hard and getting ready to send a new message. She sent a message with the same content to Kirito, Lisbeth and company and also Shiune and the rest. After that, Asuna hurriedly took off her indoor clothes, and as she didn't want to waste time choosing any clothing, she systematically put on her school uniform. She put on her shoes and ran out of the house. The gentle light of day in the afternoon was reflected on the remaining white snow on the road as they entered Asuna's eyes.

It's the Sunday on the last week of March, 2pm. The pedestrians on the streets looked like they were impatient and couldn't wait for spring to come as they walked with a cheery attitude. Asuna went past them and rushed towards the station.

She couldn't remember how she managed to check where the trains were going or even where she transferred. Once she recovered, Asuna found herself running to the gantry of the station. Deep inside her mind, it felt like there was a migraine, as her shattered thoughts continued to appear and disappear.

The girl grit her teeth and grimaced, "Yuuki, hang on." And ran into the taxi that arrived at the waiting point.

It seemed that the inpatient counter was notified. Once Asuna opened her tense lips to explain her intents, the nurse immediately handed over the pass and told her to hurry to the highest level of the central ward building.

Asuna hastily waited for the number that indicated the floor number to increase, and when the door opened, she immediately rushed out. She clumsily used the access pass on the scanner of the safety door, and even though she knew that she was breaking the rules, she continued to run. She ran through the white monotonous passageway. Once she made the last turn, the door to the sterile room where Yuuki lay asleep entered her eyes.

—But at this moment, Asuna could only stare wide eyed at the scene.

There were two doors lined with each other, and this should be the entrance to the observation room. Deep inside with large words of regulations was the sterile room. Asuna went through the thick enhanced doors before, and now, they were completely open. As she looked at the scene inside, one of the medical personnel in surgical clothing inside walked over quickly.

That person saw Asuna and nodded at her, even whispering 'Please hurry in'. While being prompted by that voice, Asuna shakily took a few steps forward, and yet stopped right in front of the door.

The insides of a white room immediately entered her vision.

The large number of apparatus that were installed inside were moved to the left wall. Two nurses and a doctor surrounded a gel bed in the middle of the room, watching over the petite figure there. The three people all wore ordinary white clothes.

Seeing this, Asuna immediately realized—nothing could be done. They could only wait beside the bed for 'that moment' which had already been pre-destined.

Doctor Kurahashi lifted his head, saw that Asuna was here, and immediately reached his left hand over as he wanted her to come over. Asuna struggled to move those lifeless legs of hers and entered the room.

There were only a few meters to the gel bed, yet she felt that it was ever so far away. Asuna was closing in on this harsh reality, and finally arrived beside the gel bed.

The skinny girl was lying on the bed, and the white blanket covered her all the way below her neck. Her frail chest was slightly suspended. The ECG on the top right corner showed a slight green waveform.

The Mebicuboid obscured the girl's head when she saw it previously, but its rectangular casing was now separated into halves. The top portion that split apart at the line between her ears was shifted 90 degrees to the back. The inside was a depression that fitted a human head and the face of that girl, sleeping with her eyes closed, was set in it.

This was the first time Asuna saw Yuuki's body in the real world. The girl who was so sickly was so thin that it was heart-aching, with her skin almost pale enough to be deemed translucent. Her face had a mysterious beauty to it, and Asuna even felt that this is what a pixie would look like if they really existed.

After staring at Yuuki for a while, Doctor Kurahashi, who was standing beside her, whispered,

"That's great...you made it just in time."

Unable to accept such words that she was able to make it in time, Asuna looked up at the doctor, but the rational eyes behind the lens looked back at Asuna earnestly. The doctor said again,

"40 minutes ago, her heart stopped once. We gave her drugs and a defibrillation shock, and she regained her pulse, but the next time..."

Asuna held her breath and let out her voice between her tightly gritted teeth. However, she couldn't say a meaningful complete sentence,

"Why...why is it...Yuuki, she's still..."

The doctor again nodded his head, and then shook it slightly.

"—Actually, when you were here in January, she was already in a state where such a thing could happen. The HIV's consumptive nature caused the high fever and the lymphoma in the primary central nervous system to deteriorate, and Yuuki had been in danger. However, we're all amazed that she was able to fight hard for these 3 months. She continued to win even

in a battle of despair. She really did her best...no—if I really have to mention it..."

At this moment, the doctor's voice let out some trembling.

"To Yuuki, these 15 years of life was a long battle. Besides HIV...she had been fighting hard against the cold and harsh reality. The testing of Medicuboid should have given her lots of pain. But...Yuuki still persisted. Without her help, it's likely that Medicuboid can only be used a year later or so. So right now—it's best to let her rest..."

Upon hearing the doctor's words, Asuna silently said to Yuuki deep inside her heart,

Yuuki—how could you lose? You're the «Absolute Sword»...that invincible swordsman who could slash everything up. You should be able to defeat the illness and your fate—

At this moment.

Yuuki's head moved slightly. Her thin eyelids moved slightly before moving a little higher. The eyes under the eyelids that were supposed to be grey due to having lost its shine showed a clear shine as they stared at Asuna.

The lips that were about the same color as the skin twitched slightly, and the slender right hand that was under the blanket started to tremble as it slowly moved towards Asuna.

The doctor said with a conscious voice,

"Asuna-san...please hold her hand."

Before he even finished, Asuna immediately reached her hands out and covered Yuuki's right hand that was as thin as coal. The icy right hand seemed to be begging for something as it clasped onto Asuna's fingers tightly.

Immediately, Asuna seemed to have an epiphany or something as she understood what Yuuki wanted to say.

She held onto Yuuki's hand tightly and lifted her head to ask the doctor,

"Doctor...can we use the Medicuboid now?"

"Eh—it can be done once we turn on the power...but...Yuuki should be hoping to be outside the machine..."

"No, Yuuki wishes to return to that world once more. I can understand her feelings. Please...let her use the Medicuboid again!"

The doctor stared at Asuna's face for a few seconds before finally agreeing to her request. He gave a few instructions to the nurses beside him, and then held on to the handle on the side of the Medicuboid before covering the top half on Yuuki's head.

"It'll take about 1 minute to activate it...what about you?"

"I'll use the AmuSphere next door!"

Asuna said and grabbed Yuuki's hand hard before putting it back at the frail girl's side. Wait for me, I'll be right there—after muttering that, she got up and left.

Asuna ran out of the sterile room and arrived at the monitoring room beside it. She opened the door and jumped onto one of the two seats that appeared, and put the AmuSphere that was on the head-rest on her head. She switched on the power and waited for the launching sequence to start, but her heart was already at the other side.

Having woken up in the house of forests, Asuna leaped out of the window beside the room like she did when she logged in from the hospital, and moved down the main street. As she flew, she opened her window and immediately sent a message over to Lisbeth, Shiune and the rest, whom she had told to log in earlier just in case.

Having rushed through the transfer gate, Asuna transferred to Panareze without hesitation. The moment she arrived at the city above the lake, she moved over to an island far into the lake. Of course, her final destination was the large tree where they first met.

At this point, it's evening in Aincrad. The sunset that shone in from the outside dyed the lake water golden. Asuna looked like she was guided by this light as she flew in the sky to this island before landing urgently on the soft pasture.

She didn't need to look around the trees. Yuuki was standing where both of them had fought for the first time. What happened that day seemed to have been a long time ago. The deep purple long hair that had some chilly feeling to it swayed in the air, and the imp girl slowly looked back.

Yuuki immediately smiled as she saw Asuna approach, and Asuna smiled back at her.

"—Thank you, Asuna. I forgot something important. I have something I must return, so no matter what, I have to meet you here."

Her voice was as cheery as before, and one could hear a little trembling. Asuna felt that Yuuki had already used all her strength trying to talk.

However, Asuna asked back in a cheery tone as she walked over to Yuuki, "What did you want to give me?"

"E-rm...I'll make it now. Please wait."

Yuuki smiled and called out the window before operating on it simply. After making the window disappear, she used her right hand and drew the sword at her waist loudly.

Yuuki's obsidian sword let out a flame-like red glow under the red sunset. She moved this sword to the front and pointed it at the large tree trunk in front of her, keeping this position until she was still, as if she was focusing the last ounce of her strength on the sword's tip.

The side of Yuuki's face distorted in pain. Her upper body swayed a little, but the legs that were opened were still trying hard to support the body.

Asuna really wanted to tell her not to force herself, but decided to bite her lips and wait. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew past the pasture. As the wind stopped, Yuuki suddenly moved.

"YAAA!!!"

The girl's right hand was swung out with such a shocking shout. The tip of the sword left 5 stab marks at a speed the naked eye couldn't see from the top right to the bottom left of the trunk. She drew the sword back, and left 5 marks from the top left corner to the bottom right corner. For each stab the lunge skill made, the trunk would make an exaggerated loud noise, and the towering trees continued to shake. If the trees were things that could be destroyed, they would be sliced in half already.

Having launched 10 strikes of the lunge skill, Yuuki used the strength in her entire body to pull the sword back and hit the intersection point. The blueish-purple dazzling light exploded all around, and the grass beside their feet bent backwards, looking like they were tossed away.

Even when the frenzy storm stopped, Yuuki, who stabbed the sword into the trunk, remained in her original position.

Suddenly, a small crest appeared in the center of the sword's tip. It spun and spread out, and also, a square parchment materialized from the surface of the branch. Once the crest that let out the blue glow was transferred onto the parchment, the parchment rolled up from the bottom.

Yuuki kept her sword, and the completed scroll floated in the air. She gradually reached out with her left hand and grabbed it.

The sword in the girl's right hand landed on the grass pasture, letting out a 'Ka-yan' sound. Yuuki's body swayed a little and moved backwards. Asuna hurriedly ran over to her to support her. Both of them sat down just like that, and Asuna used both her arms to hug Yuuki's small body.

Yuuki closed her eyes, causing Asuna to be shocked. But those eyelids immediately opened slowly. Yuuki let out a calm smile, and then seemed to murmur,

"That's strange...I've never felt pain or sadness, but I just feel weak..."

Asuna smiled back and said,

"It's alright. You're just tired. Just rest a little. You'll recover immediately."

"Un...Asuna...take this...it's my...OSS..."

This voice was completely different from before. It was stuttering and trembling at the same time. The one organ Yuuki had left, the brain where the consciousness was gathered, was about to wear out. This made Asuna rage inside, but she still held her emotions in check as she smiled and said,

"Are you really going to give it to me...?"

"I hope that...you will accept this...Asuna...here...open the window..."

"...Un."

Asuna waved her left hand to summon the window and opened the OSS settings menu. Yuuki raised her trembling hands and put the little scroll she was holding right onto the surface of the window. Once the scroll disappeared with the light, Yuuki sighed in a satisfied manner and put her

left hand down. She smiled gently and seemed to be wheezing as she muttered,

"The name...of the skill...is «Mother's Rosario»...I suppose...it can help me...protect Asuna..."

On hearing these words, Asuna's tears finally landed on Yuuki's chest, but she still smiled and said with a clear voice,

"Thank you, Yuuki—I promise you, if I have to leave this world someday, I'll definitely pass this sword skill over to others. Your sword...shall live on forever."

"Un...thank you..."

Yuuki nodded her head. The amethyst eyes were letting out something glowing.

At this moment, there were several rumblings, or rather, sounds of flying being heard as they came closer. There were sounds of boots landing on the grass patch around Asuna and Yuuki. As they looked up, 5 people, Jun, Thatch, Taruken, Nori and Shiune were all over them and came running over.

They formed a semicircle around Yuuki and knelt down. Yuuki looked around at every face and showed a troubled look.

"What's with everyone...didn't we have, a farewell before...I told you, the promise, not to bid me farewell for the final time...didn't I..."

"We're not here to send you off. We're here to cheer for you. If our leader is going to be devastated in the next world because we're not around, we'll be really troubled!"

Jun smiled as he said. His hand that was covered by the reddish copper gauntlet grabbed Yuuki's right hand, and continued,

"Don't run around so much that I can't find you. I'll immediately find you."

"What...are you saying...that's too sudden...I'll get angry...you know..."

Making a 'chi chi' sound with her tongue, Nori cheerily said,

"That won't do. If we're not around, you can't do anything, leader. Just wait down there...wait for us..."

Nori's face suddenly twisted, and tears started to flow out from her large black eyes. Then, she made 2, 3 whimpers from deep inside her throat that couldn't be suppressed.

"That won't do...Nori...you promised not to cry, didn't you..."

Smiling and interrupting this, Shiune's face showed two lines of clear tears. Thatch and Taruken had no intention of hiding their tears as they held on to Yuuki's hand.

Yuuki again stared at the faces of the quintet, and then smiled and tearily said to them,

"Really, you guys...I'll be waiting there...for you people...take your time and come over...it's alright..."

The 6 members of the Sleeping Knights overlapped their hands together and looked like they would be swearing a reunion before nodding their heads hard. Once Shiune and company got up, another few flapping of wings could be heard approaching.

The ones who appeared were Kirito, Yui, Lisbeth, Lyfa and Silica. Everyone landed and immediately joined the ranks around Yuuki, and then grabbed Yuuki's hand hard.

Asuna was hugging Yuuki as she watched everything with teary eyes. Suddenly, she noticed something. Once Kirito and the rest stopped, there were still slight sounds of wings fluttering, and it wasn't just one. Wings of all sorts of tribes overlapped each other, forming a grand echo that's like an organ.

Asuna, Yuuki, Shiune, Lisbeth and company all looked at the sky.

They saw a large ribbon that came over from the direction of Panareze.

Several players were flying over in a straight line. The one in the front most position was the leader of the sylphs, Sakuya, whose coat fluttered with the wind. Beside her were sylphs wearing green shirts of different shades. Looking over at the numbers, it seemed that all the sylphs that were logged in came over.

No—it's not just the main street. Even in all directions from all around, many ribbons were coming over to the island. The red ribbons belong to the Salamanders, and the yellow should represent the Cait Siths. Also, there were Imps, Gnomes, Undines...and all sorts of player organisations

leading all sorts of tribes over to the large tree. There's about 500...no, more than a 1000 people.

Yuuki looked wide-eyed in Asuna's arms and let out a cry of amazement.

"Uwahh...that's amazing...so many elves..."

Asuna smiled and said to her,

"Sorry, you hate to mobilize so many people, Yuuki...but I asked Lisbeth to call them over."

"Why would I...that's silly...but, why are there so many people...it's like...I'm dreaming..."

Yuuki muttered as she panted, and the swordsmen that arrived at the sky above the island let out a waterfall-like sound as they descended. Sakuya and Alicia and the other leaders of the organisations were gathered outside as they surrounded Asuna and company, and then knelt down on one leg and lowered their heads. This wasn't an island that was really big, and immediately after, it was filled with players.

Asuna stared at Yuuki's eyes and tried to express the emotions in her heart into words.

"Be...because..."

Her tears dropped again.

"Yuuki...you were once the strongest swordsman in this world...and there wouldn't be any swordsman that would appear in this world like you. I really couldn't let you go alone like that...everyone, everyone is praying for you...hoping that your new journey will be as perfect as this one..."

"...So happy...I'm really...happy..."

Yuuki lifted her neck and looked around at the swordsmen around her before leaning her head on Asuna's arm.

Yuuki closed her eyes, and her thin chest puffed and breathed a few times. She used those purple eyes to look at Asuna once more. She then breathed hard, seemingly squeezing her last ounce of strength, and continued in an interrupted voice,

"I've always...always been thinking, that I, who had to face death ever since I was born...what's the meaning of living in this world...I can't create

anything in this world, and I can't help others...I can only waste countless drugs and machines...can only bring trouble to others...I'm bothered too, hurt...if I have to disappear in the end...just let me disappear...I thought of that a few times...I just felt...why did I have to be born in this world..."

The last remaining ounce of life was seeping away from Yuuki. The petite body in Asuna's arms seemed to be turning lighter bit by bit and transparent. Yuuki's voice became softer and softer, as if it was going to stop immediately. However, no language could mark itself deep inside Asuna's soul.

"But...but...I felt that I finally got the answer...even...if it's meaningless...if I can live...that's enough...because...at the final moment...I could actually feel...such meaning...so many people...are surrounding me...and I'm lying in...the arms of the one I loved the most...as I await the terminal of the journey..."

Yuuki's words stopped with a simple and short pant. Her eyes seemed to see through Asuna and out at a distant place. Was she looking at the real otherworld—the real elf island where the heroes' souls resided?



Asuna couldn't hold back the tears that were dropping. The dripping tears continued to land on Yuuki's chest, disintegrate into light particles and scatter. However, her mouth naturally smiled. Asuna nodded her head hard and said the final words to Yuuki,

"I...I'll definitely meet you again. Even if it's somewhere else, another world, I'll meet you again...at that moment, you must tell me...what you found there..."

Yuuki's purple eyes immediately met Asuna's stare. Deep inside her eyes, there was the shine of the endless energy and courage Asuna saw when she met Yuuki the first time. The shine immediately formed two drops of tears that flowed out, down Yuuki's pale face, and finally dissolved and faded into light.

She moved her lips slightly and made a smile. At this moment, a voice entered Asuna's consciousness directly.

I tried my best to live... Here, I really lived...

As if the last snowflake landed on the pure white snowy field, the «Absolute Sword» Yuuki closed her eyes.

Chapter 12

The slight touch on the right shoulder of the uniform caused Asuna to look over; it was a light sakura petal on it.

The girl used a fingertip of her left hand to tap it. It was an oval shaped petal without any stains on it, looking as if it wanted to indicate something as it continued to move. It finally floated with the breeze and disappeared amongst the many white spots dancing in the air. Putting her hands back on her knees, Asuna looked at the blurry spring sky again.

Right now, it's the first Saturday of April, 3pm.

It has been a week since Yuuki died, and her funeral had just ended. The location of the funeral was a Christian church surrounded by sakura trees in the hilly region of Hodogaya, Yokohama District, and the petals that started falling looked like they were sending Yuuki off—however, the funeral itself was far from the stereotype of being 'solemn'. Including the aunt, who was the mourner, there were only four relatives who attended the funeral. However, there were more than 100 youths who claimed to be Yuuki's friends. Of course, these people in their teens and twenties were all players of ALO. The relative who accepted the signatures at the counter may have thought that Yuuki didn't have many friends because she had been hospitalized for more than 3 years, and seemed to be thoroughly shocked by the turnout.

Once the funeral ended, everyone was at the large front yard in front of the church discussing the «Absolute Sword» incident, but Asuna herself couldn't get together with the crowd for some reason, and she quietly left to find a bench behind the shadows of the church sanctuary as she looked up at the sky by herself.

Yuuki had left this world—the Yuuki who said hello through a probe on the shoulder, the Yuuki who smiled when she saw Asuna's cooking in the home of forests, had gone to a faraway place and would never come back. Up till now, Asuna couldn't accept this fact. This girl wasn't crying anymore, but whether it was in the midst of a noisy crowd, a corner in a café, or in the winds of Alfheim, her heart raced whenever she thought she heard Yuuki's voice.

During the past few days, Asuna had been thinking about what «life» exactly meant.

All lifeforms were instruments of gene transfer that existed to increase the chances of their own blood's continued existence in the future. Decades ago, this saying seemed to have caused a commotion. If it was viewed merely through this point, even people who suffered from HIV in such an age, lack of an immune system or something similar would only be considered a mere lifeform. However, this virus would continue to multiply and duplicate itself until it took the life of its host Yuuki, causing her death.

If one thought of it in another way, humans had been doing the same thing for thousands of years. They took other people's lives for their own gain, they sacrificed other countries to ensure their own countries' safety. Even when she looked up at the sky, she could see a formation of fighter jets flying from Atsugi base to an unknown place, letting out white contrails on the other side of the spring scenery. Will humans one day destroy the world they exist in like this virus? Or will they be defeated by some organism with higher intelligence and be cast away...?

The last words Yuuki left behind still echoed in Asuna's ears. She said that she couldn't create anything in this world, and couldn't give any help to others—Yuuki herself didn't leave any of her genes behind as she left this world.

However, Asuna's inner thoughts were moving as she touched the butterfly knot on her uniform. Yuuki did use this instantaneous touch to leave a mark that couldn't be erased deep inside her heart. The soul of the «Absolute Sword» and the heroic bearing that challenged this great difficulty continued to live on in Asuna's heart. The youths that were present amounted to more than 100, and they should have the same thoughts as Asuna. Even as the memories fade with time, even as the memories crystallize, there would be something in everyone's hearts.

In that case, life wasn't just a transfer of information through the 4 bases^[5]. It was an instrument that could hold memories, mind and soul that didn't have any physical bodies. In the distant future, if humans could really create a complete medium of a spirit through memes or an ambiguous state where the brain mimics the virus, the incomplete life of humanity could then use this to prevent their own extinction—

Until that day comes, I must use a way I can to transfer Yuuki's soul on. When I have children, I will continue to explain this incident to them, I will let them know that in a gap between reality and the virtual world, a miraculous petite girl once let out such a glow.

Asuna muttered to herself deep in her heart, and then silently opened those eyes that she did not know she had closed.

She saw a figure coming over from a corner of the building in front of the porch, and hurriedly used her fingers to wipe away the tears in her eyes.

It was a lady. Asuna felt that she met her before somewhere, but didn't have any impression on that face at all. That woman's body was slightly tall, and she had a simple looking black one-piece dress with a shawl covering her shoulders. She had shoulder-length black hair, and the silver necklace in front of her chest was the only ornament on her. She looked like she was in her twenties.

The woman headed over to Asuna and finally stopped slightly in front of her before bowing. Asuna hurriedly got up, and once she lifted her head, the seemingly transparent clear skin of the woman entered her eyes. The pale white reminded Asuna of herself when she woke up from her long slumber. Looking at it closely, one could tell that the woman's neck which was exposed out of the shawl was as slender as a wrist, it looked like it would break with a single touch.

The other party stared wordlessly at Asuna's face for a while, and then, those beautiful date-shaped eyes showed a tender expression as her lips showed a slight smile.

"Are you Asuna-san? You look just like you did in the virtual world. I recognized you at first glance."

On hearing those calm and wise words, Asuna immediately guessed who this woman in front of her was.

"Ah...are you, Shiune-san...?"

"Ehh, that's right. My real name's An Shi En. Nice to meet you...and long time no see."

"Ni, nice to meet you for the first time! I'm Yuuki Asuna. We haven't met for a week."

After the somewhat awkward greeting, both of them started chuckling. Asuna used her left hand to indicate for Shi En to sit down on the bench, and she sat down beside her.

At this moment, Asuna noticed something. All the Sleeping Knights members were probably patients who were struck with terminal illnesses

and needed care at a hospice. Was it really alright for her to come out alone like that...?

Shi En seemed to notice Asuna's concern as she nodded her head slightly before saying,

"Don't worry. I finally got permission to go out during April. My brother came along with me too, but I wanted him to wait for me outside."

"...Then...your body's already...?"

"Yes...I had acute lymphoblastic leukemia... in other words, the leukemia in my body disappeared... I had it three years ago, and I went into remission after undergoing chemotherapy... But I fell ill again last year...after that relapse, the doctor indicated that the only effective treatment was a bone marrow transplant. But the white blood cell composition of my family members didn't match mine...and the bone bank didn't have any suitable donors for me. I was already mentally ready and decided to make use of my remaining time..."

Shi En paused for a while and looked at the sakura flowers above. A small little vortex breeze whipped up several flower petals and made them dance like snowflakes.

"—Once my illness relapsed, I couldn't undergo a bone marrow transplant, and was administered all sorts of drugs and salvage chemotherapy to ease the pain. But because of the overuse of new and test drugs, the side effects were really serious...it was really so tough that I had thought of giving up a few times. I told the attending doctor many times before that if there's no hope, just let me go through chemotherapy so that I can go through my last moments..."

Asuna suddenly noticed that Shi En's hair that swayed with the sakura flowers was actually a wig.

"But...whenever I met Yuuki, I just had the thought of not giving up easily. Yuuki had been fighting with the same pain for 15 years, and how could I, someone older than her, give up after a mere three years of treatment? I kept telling myself this—however, the amount of medication dropped slowly since February this year...and the doctor told me that my condition was improving. However, I just felt in my heart that the moment finally came. They changed my medications from the salvaging chemotherapy type to the treatment more common for standard living. I was really scared then...and yet felt at ease. I knew about Yuuki's condition, so I felt...if

Yuuki's with me, it doesn't matter even if I go to another world. No matter where I go, she'll be protecting me...it's funny, isn't it? Yuuki's younger than me, yet I rely on her so much..."

"No...I can understand."

Asuna replied simply and nodded her head. Shi En then smiled and nodded as she continued on,

"—In the end...a week ago, the following day after I said farewell to Yuuki, the doctor came to my room...and said that I had recovered completely...the leukemia has completely vanished, and I could be discharged. I was wondering what nonsense he was spouting, whether he was just letting me go back to meet my family and say my farewells? I was wondering about that...and in the midst of confusion, I was really discharged two days later. Yesterday, I even felt that I may be cured. I heard that a certain test drug was really effective..."

Shi En paused for a while again, and her smile was twisted with a somewhat teary expression.

"But, I just felt that something didn't feel right. This time was given to me when I felt that it was long gone, and only served to bother me. And...and to Yuuki, this is..."

Shi En's voice trembled a little, and when Asuna noticed the little tears that appeared in the corners of her eyes, she couldn't help but feel sad too.

"Yuuki was waiting, yet I'm the only one waiting. Is this really already...I already promised Yuuki, Ran-san, Clovis and Merida that...we'll always be together...yet I...yet I..."

Shi En couldn't talk any further as she lowered her head and her shoulders continued to tremble.

Ran-san should be the first guild leader, which would make her Yuuki's older sister. The other two should be Sleeping Knight members who were already dead. The members of the Sleeping Knights may have experienced the most devastating and painful lives in this world, and the trials that were experienced may be more reliable than being family or lovers in a certain sense. Asuna felt that she had no right to say anything, but she couldn't help but do so.

She reached her left hand out and silently covered Shi En's right hand that was placed on the bench. Shi En's fingers were thin, but Asuna really felt a sense of warmth from the hand.

"Shi En-san. I've...been recently thinking about...life should be something that can hold and pass a person's thoughts. For a long time, I've been scared of expressing my thoughts to others, and I didn't dare to look into other people's thoughts. But Yuuki told me that there was nothing to be scared of. I want to pass this strength I learnt from Yuuki to more people. I hope that while I'm still alive, I can pass Yuuki's thoughts to further places, and then...when I meet Yuuki again, I hope that I can pass her even more thoughts."

It was a little interrupted, but Asuna still tried her best to say such words. She felt that she didn't express more than half of her emotions, but Shi En, who lowered her head, slowly nodded her head deeply as she put her other hand on Asuna's left hand.

Shi En lifted her face, and though those beautiful black eyes were stained with tears, she was smiling.

"Thank you...Asuna-san."

After muttering that, Shi En reached her arms out to hug Asuna, and Asuna hugged her thin body hard. Shi En then whispered beside Asuna's eyes,

"We're all thankful to you, Asuna-san. Ever since Yuuki's sister, Ran-san died, Yuuki's been trying her best to encourage and support us in place of her sister, and we ended up over-relying on her...whether it's pain or difficulties, Yuuki would lend her strength to support us. You might feel that it's pointless saying this now...I was really worried about Yuuki. I was wondering who would be Yuuki's pillar of support. She was always smiling and never showed any signs of irritation...but I was worried that one day, the petite her would bear too much and crumble...at that moment—you appeared. Yuuki looked really happy when she was with you, Asuna-san. She just looked so natural, like a bird who finally knew how to fly. She seemed to be able to fly so high into the skies...until we couldn't reach it...and then left us..."

After saying this, Shi En paused for a moment, and the screen inside Asuna's heart showed an instant glimpse of Yuuki becoming a bird and flying high in the other world.

Shi En moved her body aside and smiled in a somewhat sheepish manner. She used her fingers to wipe away her tears, and took a deep breath before saying in a clear voice:

"—Actually, it's not just me. Jun...was also afflicted with cancer that was tough to treat, but recently, the drug that was given started to work really well, and I heard that the tumor got smaller. It's like Yuuki's telling both of us that it's too early for us. Looks like it'll be a long time before the Sleeping Knights are finally together."

"...Yeah. Next time, you must put me as a formal member."

Asuna and Shi En exchanged looks with each other, fufu, and started laughing. They lifted their heads and looked at the sakura-colored sky. The steady breeze blew from behind, shaking their hair. Asuna imagined Yuuki hugging both of them on the shoulders and flying off while flapping her wings, and then silently closed her eyes again.

A few minutes passed just like that. Two sets of new footsteps that approached them broke this silence. They turned their faces behind, and saw a boy wearing the same uniform as Asuna — Kirigaya Kazuto, and Doctor Kurahashi in black robes, walking over.

Asuna and Shi En got up and greeted the two people who approached them. They both nodded their heads. Kazuto then said to Asuna,

"So you're here. Did I bother you two?"

"No. But...eh? Kirito-kun, you know Doctor Kurahashi?"

"Uun...recently. Because of that message probe recently, we've been using email to contact each other."

Doctor Kurahashi then interrupted,

"Yeah. That camera was really interesting, so I was discussing with him over whether it was suitable for use in FullDive Technology."

"I see. Then...that means..."

Asuna suddenly thought of something, and asked the doctor,

"How's the testing with the Medicuboid? Did someone inherit that screen...?"

On hearing that, the doctor immediately smiled and nodded his head hard, saying,

"Ah, it's nothing. We got sufficient data for the testing. We're proceeding with negotiations with the manufacturers for a practical product. Maybe An-san and the rest can use Medicuboid soon..."

The last parts of these words were said to Shi En, but after talking till here, the doctor widened his eyes and hurriedly said,

"Ahh, I'm really sorry. I should have said this right from the beginning—congratulations on your discharge, An-san. I suppose Yuuki... should be rather happy..."

Shi En tightly grabbed the hand the doctor had extended over and nodded her head hard. Then, she held hands with Kazuto, whom she befriended in the game.

"Thank you. I may not need to use the Medicuboid now...but I'm happy...about the thoughts that I can leave a data of my memory to bless many people fighting with illnesses."

Once Shi En said that, the doctor continued nodding.

"Yes. As the first tester of that machine, Yuuki's name will live on forever—I really want to award this prize to her and the external provider who came up with the initial design..."

"I suppose Yuuki didn't want the prize. She may have said that prizes couldn't be eaten."

Shi En's words caused everyone to laugh. As the calm laughter subsided, Asuna noticed some part of the words Doctor Kurahashi said, and repeated it,

"Then...doctor, who did you say was the external provider of the initial design...? Wasn't Medicuboid designed by a medical device manufacturer?"

"Ahh...erm, about that."

The doctor seemed to be racking his own memory as he narrowed his eyes.

"Of course, the device was manufactured by the device manufacturer, but the so-called core of the device, the basic design of the high-density signal component was provided for free by an external party. I remember that person was a female...should be a researcher in a foreign university. But she's Japanese...erm, she's called..."

Doctor Kurahashi then said the name. Asuna never heard of it before, and Shi En should be the same too, but the expression Kazuto showed caused Asuna to gasp.

Kazuto seemed to have heard something unbelievable as his expression became really hollow. His pale lips trembled a few times.

"Wha...what's with you, Kirito-kun?"

Asuna called out in a panicked manner, but Kazuto just remained silent. After a while, his lips let out a hoarse voice.

"I...I know that person."

"Eh...?"

"And I met her before..."

Kazuto immediately looked at Asuna's eyes. His black iris looked like they went through time and space as he looked as if he was staring at a certain other world.

"When Heathcliff dived...that person took care of him. Both of them researched the FullDive technology in the same lab in the university...in other words, the real provider for Medicuboid's basic design was..."

"..."

At this moment, Asuna couldn't talk.

Does this mean—Medicuboid and «The Seed Nexus» were both born out of the seed that person grew?

Shi En and Doctor Kurahashi tilted their heads in a puzzled manner, but Kazuto couldn't answer their question. He could only look completely bewildered as he stared at the sakura petals that continued to float by his eyes.

Suddenly, Asuna felt a large torrent of time flowing through.

This world called «reality» is basically one of the many truths.

Besides it, there were also high tectonics that formed the earth like numerous flower petals gathering.

And right now, a large force that covered the world and continued to move forward was slowly showing its shape—

Asuna used her arms to hug her body tightly. At this moment, a strong gust of wind blew, causing the petals that were floating nearby to be taken into the distant sky.

(END)

Author Notes

I'm Kawahara Reki. Thank you for reading this «Sword Art Online 7—Mother's Rosario» volume. (There will be many mentions with regards to the content in this volume. Please take note!)

It was about 10 years ago when I started to write light novels seriously. I knew of a professional author and became friends with him, and I discussed my work with him many times.

Even now, I'm still rather grateful for plenty of his indispensable advice, and amongst them, what impressed me the most was 'even if it's a novel, when writing about humans' misfortune, you have to consider carefully why you are writing it'.

I actually had a flaw of 'focusing on the development of the story and ignoring the possibility of it happening in real life' I couldn't correct (or it could be said to be that I'm taking the opportunity about it...) anyway, I would normally give the characters great misfortune to define their natures and motives. For example, I've never mentioned the details about the background of how the lead in the SAO series Kirito lost his biological parents in an accident at all. In other words, I created the reason why Kirito was distant from others and ignored the 2 characters, Kirito's parents, who were involved in the accident and were directly killed by it. (The female lead in the compilations of short stories in volume 2 «Red-nosed Reindeer» Sachi may also be like this).

Of course, I knew that I had such a bad habit when writing, so I felt somewhat troubled when refining the script for the publishing of the 7th volume. Even though there's the theme of «VR technology and medicine», does the female lead in this volume, Yuuki, really have to die? Could there be another kind of ending? Did I just write this ending to rile up the readers' emotions?

However, as I was troubled, I found that I could only write such stories. It may sound like an excuse, but my bad habit of 'underestimating the character's misfortune' is still a part of the work. Thus, what I could do was to try and deeply understand the thoughts of the characters in my work that had misfortune (including the antagonists). Of course, if the readers can think of what kind of effect Yuuki's 15 years of life would bring to Asuna and the rest, I'll be really grateful.

To the editor Miki-san, who was rather bothered as I messed up the work progress after the New Year, abec-san who drew large character illustrations in this volume, and of course, to all the readers, I'll hope that we'll get along in 2011! Thank you for your support!

January 27th 2011, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ Cloth bibs with a person's number(ゼッケン) and Absolute Sword(絶剣) are both pronounced as 'zekken'
2. ↑ "僕 (boku)", the personal pronoun which Yuuki used, is normally used by boys and rarely young girls.
3. ↑ thing attached to the end of the chain
4. ↑ What japanese call high-five
5. ↑ refers to the bases of DNA: A, G, C, and T

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